

Brian  
and the  
Wood-Folk







LONE PINE

Hills

Pool

Marsh

amble Patch

Pool

Waterfall

BIRCH  
WOOD

Camp

Moor

Moor

Bracken  
Patch

BADGER'S BOULDERS

Heather

Gorse  
Bushes

Fox's Earth

OOD

CARRYN





Patricia ,

Duncan and

Red Curls.

From  
John and Silken .

BRIAN AND THE WOOD-FOLK





# BRIAN AND THE WOOD-FOLK

BY  
MARIBEL EDWIN



1924  
LONDON & TORONTO  
J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.  
NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO.

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN



## TO MY READERS

ALL children love the woods and the moors, so I am sure many of you will want to know whereabouts Brian lived, that he was able to make such close acquaintance with the wild animals and their ways. Brian's Windhover lies somewhere—almost anywhere—between the Dee, the Tay, and the Tweed. But it does not matter much, for if you cannot find his Windhover you can find another like it—in Yorkshire, Cumberland, or Devon—perhaps not all in one place, but a bit here and a bit there, and in any of it you will see the same creatures and many more living their lives in much the same way.

But you will see them only if you look often, and carefully, and above all quietly and kindly, as Brian had to learn to do.

Perhaps you say that Brian must have been unusually lucky to see the "Wood-folk" doing so many things that most of us only know about from the books of naturalists who have spent many years in watching wild life—why, then, I can only answer that I hope you will be lucky too!

MARIBEL EDWIN.





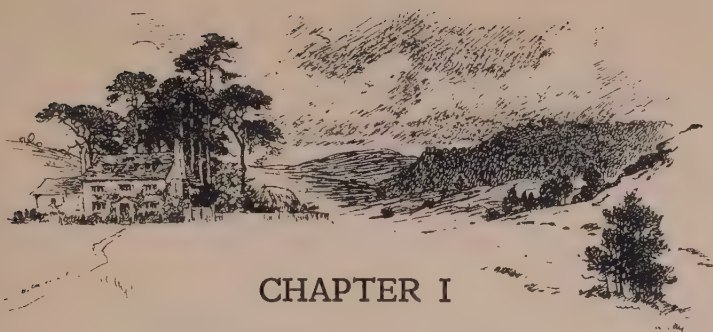


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## CHAPTER I

### THE ADVENTUROUS BUNNY

IT was in the early days of Spring that Brian came to his new home. The house, wide-fronted and brown, appears to crouch for shelter beneath its big roof; and well it may, for every wind that blows seems to want to lift it and the scrubby trees behind it right off the knoll! Perhaps because of this, or it may be because it looks a little like a great brown bird perched up there, the house is called "Windhover." Away to the north and to the east of the knoll stretches the great moor, and over it very often a real "Windhover," or Kestrel, circles gracefully, or poises in one spot, with swiftly beating wings, and keen eyes searching the heather far below.

The main path to the house winds up the western slope of the little hill from the gate on the road; but there is another path that

runs straight down from the front of the house to a narrow, rickety wooden gate only a few yards away from the stream. It is a noisy, talkative little stream just there, still full of the fun of crossing the moor and leaping over the waterfall; but a little farther on, where it passes under the bridge and enters Mr. Hale's farm-lands, it becomes quite sedate.

Beyond the stream are the woods; the Birch plantation next to the moor, the mixed wood that ends suddenly at the roadside, and, still farther south, Pine-woods and yet more Pine-woods. Almost opposite the little gate, but hidden from it by a group of Larch-trees, there is a curious, bowl-shaped open space, where the green turf is broken by gaping holes from which fine sand keeps spilling out. It is a Rabbit warren. There, when the Larches were covered with rosy buds, and the Birches were still like a purple cloud, Puff, the baby Rabbit, was born.

The nursery was a little apart from the other burrows, and, unlike them, had only one opening to the world above ground. It was warm and soft, for it was lined with some of the Mother Rabbit's own fur. She did not remain beside the babies while they were very small,

but spent long hours lying under a bush not far away, only visiting them to give them their meals. At first there was nothing to choose between Puff and his two brothers and two sisters, he was as blind and helpless as they were; but as time went on and the Rabbit family became active, squirming little balls of fur, he became the undoubted leader. He was the biggest of the five, with the fluffiest coat and the silkiest white cushion of a tail. Moreover, for sheer curiosity he easily beat all the others put together! Time after time his mother had to push him back into the nursery with her hind foot when she was going out for her dinner.

"Lie low, you bad bunny, or the Weasel will get you!" she would say, and then she would kick up the sand to make a rampart to hide the nursery door before she scampered off to the woods.

While the Mother Rabbit was away the babies had to lie low and say nothing, but every now and then she would let them come out with her into the green hollow, and then what fun they had! They chased each other round and round, jumped over each other, and played "King of the Castle" on a tussock of grass. It was usually



Puff who was King, for he could push his brothers and sisters off quite easily. They nibbled the sweet young grass, and, when they were tired, stretched themselves out on the sun-warmed sand and just basked. But the moment they heard a warning thump on the ground, they knew that one of the big Rabbits scented danger and was giving the signal with his hind foot, and that they must scuttle back to the burrow. White tails twinkled to right and to left; an instant later not a Rabbit was to be seen about the warren.

One day, when a soft Spring wind was setting all the thousands of fresh little Birch leaves a-quiver, and playing with the long twigs of the Larches, now covered with tufts of tender green, Puff set out on his great adventure. His mother had stayed away longer than usual—a dog roaming through the woods had forced her to leave the homeward path,—and Puff was tempted to disobey orders and go out and explore by himself.

“It smells so good!” he said, as he poked his head out of the burrow.

A moment later he was running across the turf, looking for all the world like a puff of grey smoke, to the very edge of the green play-

ground. He climbed over the rough grass at the rim of the "bowl," and so reached the beginning of the wood. His brown eyes widened, and his little nose twitched faster than ever. The world was a much bigger place than he had thought. All kinds of new scents reached him, and they were very fascinating.

"I must see some more of this place," said Puff.

On went the little Rabbit, along a mossy path among the trees. Luckily for him the stray dog had gone off to the moor, and Fire-eyes, the Weasel, was fast asleep after a big meal. The birds twittering among the branches did not frighten him, he had seen birds before. Suddenly he saw something strange, a little red-brown animal sitting on a fallen tree; but still he was not afraid, only very curious. So he went on.

As for the Squirrel, he was not a bit alarmed either; it would take more than a baby Rabbit to disturb Red-flash when he is eating the toadstools that grow on that damp old tree. But he saw Puff, of course; his bright eyes had seen him long before the Rabbit was aware of the stranger on the log. He went on nibbling, sitting erect, with his bushy, dark brown tail hoisted

straight up, and his tiny front paws holding the toadstool. Puff admired his tufted ears, and the tail so unlike his own.

"Baby bunnies have no business to be out alone," said Red-flash, suddenly.

Puff pretended not to hear. He was quite a big Rabbit now, not a baby any longer.

"The Weasel will catch you," said the Squirrel; "the Weasel, the Weasel, the Weasel!"

Puff wondered what this Weasel was like, that everyone made such a fuss about, but he said nothing.

Red-flash went on chattering to himself between bites, and the little Rabbit crouched in the grass and watched him. He swallowed the last piece of the toadstool, and made a leap for the nearest tree-trunk. Puff was amazed. He thought Rabbits could jump and run, but to leap like that, and to run up trees! Another flash of red-brown fur, and the Squirrel was on the log again.

He had a very pretty brown coat, though as yet it had not the bright red tint that would come in Summer, and his soft waistcoat had still many greyish hairs among the white. He sat on the log, with his head on one side, and looked at the Rabbit, for he was always interested

in everything, and ready to chatter. But presently a new idea came into his head. He remembered Russet.

"Russet!" he said to himself, "I must go and find her."

Off he went, up the tree-trunk, along one branch, dropped to one below it, jumped to the next tree, swung there for an instant, then bounded gaily on over the branches till the leaves hid him from view. Puff was forgotten, for what does a baby Rabbit matter when a young Squirrel is wooing the prettiest little lady-Squirrel in all the land?

Puff wandered on through the wood, pausing every now and then to sniff new smells, and pricking his ears when a stick crackled in the undergrowth. Something in the soft, sweet breeze made him forget that home was far away, and that there were no wise, big bunnies to give the danger-signal, and no safe burrows to retreat to if enemies approached. Though his mother had told him many things, his life had been so sheltered that he had not yet learnt that the wild animal's life is one of constant danger. But luck was with him, and the animals of the wood were too busy with their own affairs to notice the fluffy grey-brown bunny wandering



over the moss and through the nodding white Wood-Anemones.

While Puff was coming nearer and nearer the other end of the wood, Brian was walking along the road that divides it from the fields. He was swinging a little bundle of books by a strap, for he was on his way home from Dr. Brown's house, where he has lessons with Elsie and Roger. He was thinking what a jolly place it was, much nicer to live in than a town. He was very glad his Daddy had bought Windhover, which had been his Mother's home when she was quite a little girl.

"Oh, what a lovely Dragon-fly!" he exclaimed, as a big insect, transparent wings glinting in the sunlight, flew across the road, and rose like a tiny aeroplane to cross the hedge.

Brian tried to peep over the hedge to see the Dragon-fly winging its way across the fields, but the tangle of Briers and Brambles and budding Hawthorns hid it from his sight. So he stooped instead to stir the golden King-cups in the ditch, in case by any chance a Frog might be lurking there.

Finding none, he strolled on, trying to whistle in imitation of a Lark high up in the blue sky above Farmer Hale's clover meadow. Some-

times he looked up at the thick wood of mixed trees to his right—Corner Wood it is called, or sometimes Windhover Wood, because it is so near Windhover House—but he could not enter it there, for a high bank of gravel rises abruptly from the roadside to the fringe of the wood.

“I must explore that wood soon,” he said to himself.

Meanwhile little Puff had reached the very edge of the wood, and was staring out with bewildered eyes at the great space opening out before him. Truly the world was a very big place. It was rather alarming to see so much of it all at once, and there was something very comforting about the bit of sand just in front of him. It made him think of home. He hopped forward to the inviting patch of loose soil; but, alas for Puff, the edge of the sand-bank was ready to crumble and give way at the slightest touch. He felt the earth tremble, and an instant later he was falling headlong down the steep slope in a cloud of blinding sand. About and around him tumbled a mass of stones, large and small, every one of which seemed to want to jump on his poor little body. Bruised and battered, half-blinded and wholly terrified, but alive, the baby bunny landed on the roadway

scarcely a yard in front of a very much startled little boy.

"Why, it's a Rabbit!" cried Brian.

Very gently he lifted Puff, and held him close to his coat, and patted his head. Puff crouched very still, except for the wobbling of his little nose and the blinking of his smarting eyes, and the thumping of his heart. How it thumped! Brian could feel it beat-beat-beating at such a rate against his hand.

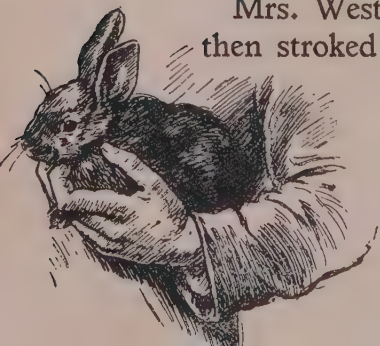
It was an excited little boy that hurried along the road and up the main path to Windhover, clasping the frightened Rabbit in his arms. Every now and then he looked down at it, as it cowered there with its ears pressed back flat and its eyes staring. Poor Puff! Home seemed very far away. He wished he had never set out on this terrible adventure.

Brian's mother was standing at the dining-room window, looking out, and she smiled as she saw him come round the corner of the house. He was flushed and panting.

"What has Brian found now?" his mother exclaimed, and went to the door to meet him.

"Oh, Mother, do look! A baby bunny!"

Mrs. West patted her son's rosy cheek, and then stroked Puff's ears very gently.



"Poor little thing," she murmured, "he's quite terrified. You're holding him too tight, dear. Pop him into the waste-paper basket."

So Puff was placed at the bottom of a deep basket, where he lay still for a few minutes. Then he began to recover from his fright and move about a little. What a strange place! The crackly papers did not feel a bit like his own sandy home. He did not like this at all, but at least it was better than being touched by hot hands and held prisoner against a great big animal that blew on his head and made queer sounds.

"Isn't he a darling, Mother? May I keep him? Where can he live? What shall I give him for dinner?"

"What a string of questions, Brian!" said Mrs. West, laughing. "Leave him there just now, and run and wash your hands. Dinner is ready; Daddy is not coming home till evening."

While they were having dinner Brian kept looking across the room at the basket very wistfully.

"May I keep him as a pet, Mummy?" he asked again.

Mrs. West shook her head.

"No, dear, I think not. He is a little wild



Rabbit, and would be much happier in the woods. After dinner you must take him down there and set him free."

"Oh, Mother——"

"Well, darling, I expect he has a mother too, who is missing him. Perhaps if you take him into the wood they will find each other again. It is much the best thing to do."

"But I'll never see him again," said Brian, sadly, "and he is such a dear little fellow."

"Why shouldn't you see him again? When I was a little girl I used to see the Rabbits often at the warren close to the stream down there. These woods are perfectly safe for you to play in, and I hope that you will see many animals there. If you are very quiet and never startle them they will get used to you, and you will be able to watch them."

"Are there lots of animals there?" said Brian, eagerly.

"Of course there are—Squirrels, Rabbits, Birds of all sorts, and—but you must see for yourself. It is far better to try to see the animals leading their natural lives than to keep a poor little creature cooped up in a cage. He would not be happy. Let him run free in the woods."

As soon as he had finished the last scrap of

pudding, Brian said, "May I go now, Mother?" and knelt down beside the basket.

This time Puff did not feel so alarmed when he felt himself lifted up. He buried his nose for a moment in Brian's coat, and decided that it had quite a nice, friendly smell, so he settled down peacefully in the little boy's arms. Brian went down the steep path that goes straight through the garden in front of the house and down the knoll to the wicket-gate. He walked carefully, stopping every now and then to talk to the Rabbit.

"Dear Bunny," he murmured, "I do hope I'll see you again."

Outside the little gate there is a path, leading on one side to the bridge, on the other away upstream through the Bramble-patch to the moor, but Brian went right across the path and down the bank to the water's edge. He had never been across this way before, but he found it quite easy, for there are dozens of natural stepping-stones just there.

"What a jolly place to play in!" he said to himself, but he did not stay at the stream, for he wanted to find the warren at once.

The bank at the other side is very steep, but Brian clambered up and made his way through

the Larches to the green warren. Of course the Rabbits heard him coming, and there was not one to be seen anywhere. They lay in their burrows listening, listening.

"Home!"

With one wild bound Puff left Brian's arms and landed on the soft turf. A streak of grey, a glimpse of bobbing white, and that was the last Brian saw of Puff that day!

"Poor little chap," laughed Brian, "didn't even wait to say good-bye!"

He stood quite still, leaning against a tree-trunk at the edge of the warren. He wondered what was happening in the burrow into which the little Rabbit had darted.

"Oh, you bad Rabbit, it's you! I thought the Weasel had got you," said the Mother Rabbit, when her naughty little son came tumbling into the burrow.

She scolded him and scolded him, as indeed he deserved, but all the time she kept touching his soft fur very gently and lovingly, she was so glad to see him alive and safe. He snuggled close to her warm side, and tried to tell her all about his great adventure; but before very long he lay quite still. He had fallen fast asleep.

By-and-by the Mother Rabbit crept up to

the opening of the burrow and looked out. Brian watched her with delight; but presently a stick cracked under his foot, and she vanished as silently as she had come. So he turned and went slowly back to the stream, where he played for a while, jumping from one stone to another, before beginning to climb the hill.

"Perhaps next time I'll see them come right out of their holes," he thought, as he turned at the little gate to look back at the wood.

A Wood-Pigeon flew swiftly over the tree-tops. Brian watched it, and the more he gazed the more he wanted to learn the secrets of the woods. It must be very thrilling to see the animals, and to know their ways. It seemed to him that this little wooden gate, so near his own home, might indeed be the very Gate of Wonderland.





## CHAPTER II

### THE HOME-MAKERS

“COO-R-R-R-ROO, coo-r-r-r-roo!”

A pretty grey-blue head peeped over the edge of a nest high up amongst the gnarled branches of an old Pine-tree. It was not a well-built nest, only a rough platform of loose twigs, but it sheltered two beautiful eggs, glossy and white. The Mother Wood-Pigeon was very proud of them.

“Coo-r-r-r-roo, coo-r-r-r-roo!” she said again contentedly, as she settled her feathers about them, to keep them safe and warm.

The Father Wood-Pigeon had gone to the fields to look for his breakfast; soon he would come back and take his turn on the nest, keeping the precious eggs warm while his mate went in search of seeds and grains for herself. In the meantime she was quite happy there, watching the early sunbeams lighting up the fresh green of the leaves, listening to a Thrush's joyous Spring song, and, above all, feeling the two smooth eggs close to her breast.

"Coo-oo-oo," she said, drowsily.

There were many little stirrings in Windhover Wood, for Spring-time is a busy time. From many a tree came a bird's love-song. It was the time of mating, of home-making, and of the beginning of new little lives. The Wood-Pigeon was not the only bird with eggs already in the nest, but some of the others had mates who would not share in the task of keeping the eggs warm night and day.

Presently the Mother Wood-Pigeon moved a little uneasily, and craned forward to look down at the fork of the neighbouring Beech-tree.

"Yes, they are coming out," she said to herself; "I wish we had not built our nest so near them. I don't trust these Squirrels a bit."

Some Squirrels are rather fond of eating birds' eggs, so it was no wonder that the Mother Wood-Pigeon eyed her brown neighbours rather suspiciously, and was glad when they frisked away in the opposite direction.

"What a lovely morning!" was the thought in little Red-flash's mind as he poked his head out of the doorway of the Squirrels' home.

Theirs was a splendid nest, carefully built and warmly lined. Hundreds and hundreds of twigs had gone to the making of its thick

walls, and they were firmly interwoven, while the inside was soft and comfortable, with its lining of moss and leaves. The nest had a strong roof so that the rain could not get in, and the main doorway was so sheltered by the great forking branches of the Beech that, though the winds might chase each other through the woods and make the whole tree rock, the Squirrels were perfectly snug inside. The second opening, the back door, was quite small and close to the branch. It was seldom used, but it might prove a way of escape in time of danger.

This nest had been the home of the Squirrel family all through the long winter. Red-flash and his sister, Shadow-tail, born the previous Spring, had stayed on for a whole year with their parents, Ruddy and Stumpy, who had been happily mated for several years. Ruddy was a big, handsome Squirrel, with a beautiful bushy tail and fine tufts on his ears, but Stumpy had never quite recovered from an accident in her early youth. She had been rather a weakly little Squirrel in her first Summer, and it happened that she only just escaped with her life from Farmer Hale's yellow dog, Towser. He had surprised her one day nibbling a Pinecone on the ground. In an instant she had

bounded to the nearest tree, and scrambled up it as fast as her little legs could carry her. But not quite fast enough to get clear away from Towser. With a dreadful snap his teeth closed on her brush. He got only a tasteless mouthful of fur for his pains, but for a long time Stumpy had a tail any Squirrel would be ashamed of, and to this day is just a little bit short in the brush.

"Breakfast!" was the next thought in Red-flash's mind, and without more ado he left the nest and made for a favourite feeding-ground by the tree-top route.

Along the Beech branches he ran, and sprang lightly on to an outspread fan of Pine, stayed there for a moment for the sheer pleasure of feeling it sway with his weight, then bounded on, without so much as a glance up at the Wood-Pigeons' nest, from branch to branch, from tree to tree, nimble and sure-footed. It was good to be a young Squirrel on a fine Spring morning!

Windhover Wood, with its mixture of Beeches, Oaks, Pines and other trees, was the special haunt of this Squirrel family; they seldom left it. But at its south-east corner—that is, a little south of the Larch-surrounded Rabbit-warren—there is a plantation of young Pines and Spruces,



stretching towards the moor on one side, but merging on its southern border into the dark, mysterious shadows of the big Pine-wood. Red-flash had never ventured so far as the old Pine-wood, but the plantation of little trees had a great attraction for him. Young Pine-shoots are juicy, and fresh buds are tender!

Just before he reached the young trees, Red-flash caught sight of a little red-brown form frisking among the long grass at the edge of the wood. It was Russet, dainty little Russet from Hollow Oak.

“Good-morning, Russet!”

The little Squirrel pretended not to hear, and took an extra big jump over a tuft of long grass. Red-flash ran down a tree-trunk and leapt to her side.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, and then ran a little farther away.

“Come and have breakfast with me,” coaxed Flash; “I can show you some delicious buds.”

Russet put her head on one side, hesitating. Then she decided to be friendly, for she really thought Red-flash a very handsome Squirrel; so the two young Squirrels feasted together in the plantation. Red-flash was delighted to find Russet in such a nice mood, and he tried to

tell her that he thought she was the prettiest little Squirrel in the world, and that he knew just the place to build a splendid home. But Russet would not listen. With a whisk of her brown tail she set off for Windhover Wood again.

"Do wait, Russet," begged Red-flash, as he followed her.

He was very much afraid she meant to go back to her home in the hollow Oak-tree, where she lived with her parents and her brother, Bushy-tail. But Russet had no such idea. She thought it great fun to tease poor Flash. So on she went, up tree and down tree, pausing sometimes to let him come near, chattering a little and then dashing away again.

As it was Saturday Brian had no lessons that morning, and was free to run down the path from Windhover as soon as breakfast was over. He crossed the stream by the stepping-stones below the wicket-gate, and hurried through the Larches to the warren. As usual, the Rabbits took alarm at once and scuttled to their burrows, but Brian knew what to do now. He turned up his coat-collar and buried his hands in his pockets, for the morning air was fresh, and then he sat quite still at the foot of a tree and waited.

One, two, three! Three little twitching noses

already at the openings of three sandy burrows! Brian never moved. Out came the Rabbits.

"All safe!" they seemed to say, as they glanced around.

A little run, a pause, another run; and then they would stop and nibble the young grass for a few minutes, but never for long; the slightest sound startled them. Other Rabbits ventured forth, big Mother Rabbits, followed by fluffy baby bunnies, and among them was one that Brian was sure must be his little friend. He nearly laughed aloud as he watched him comb his ears with his little hind feet. In the distance a dog barked. Instantly every Rabbit was motionless, as though turned to stone. And not unlike stones they looked with their grey-brown coats. A little boy might have passed them by, and if the wind was blowing their scent in the other direction even a dog might have been deceived.

Clap! Clap!

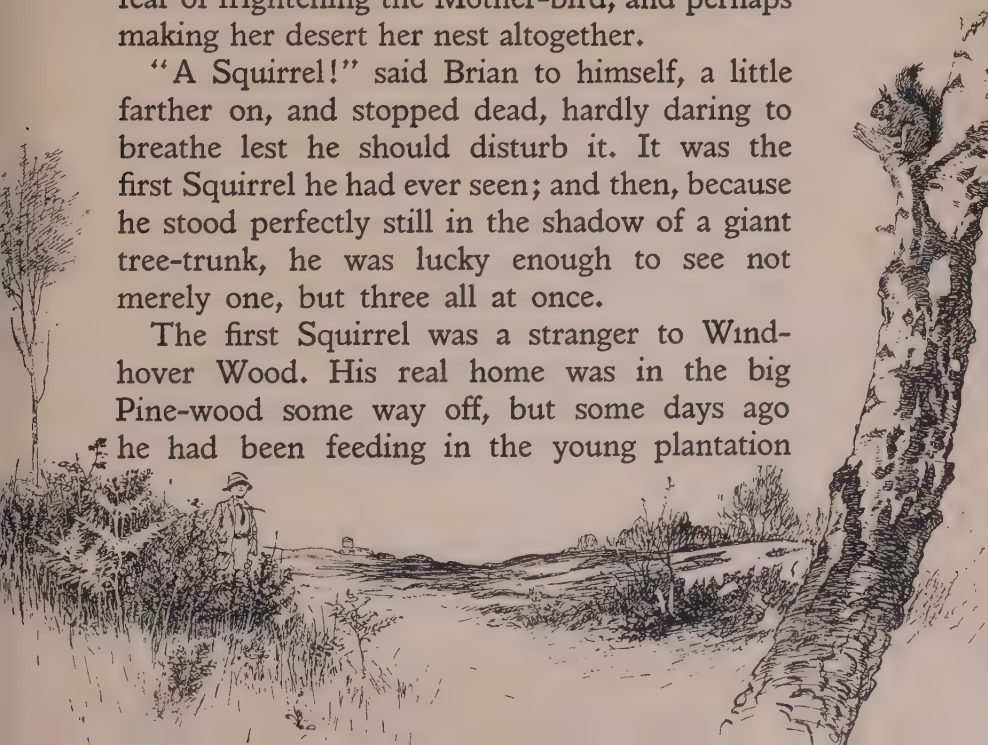
Brian could not resist the temptation of clapping his hands to see what the Rabbits would do. The "stones" became alive, and a moment later the green hollow was deserted.

Brian walked slowly into the wood, treading on the softest spots, and making as little noise

as he could. In many places there was a velvety carpet of bright green moss, and here and there a patch of pale Primroses or of starry white Wood-Sorrel flowers. Sometimes the stretch of tree-trunks was broken by a little thicket of bushes, and in one of these Brian found a Thrush's nest. The startled bird flew off; and he peeped into the nest and saw four pale blue eggs, spotted with black, lying in a deep cup. The nest was made mostly of coarse grasses, with a firm lining of dried mud to keep out the damp. Brian did not touch the eggs, of course; he had promised his mother that he would never do that; and he did not stay long for fear of frightening the Mother-bird, and perhaps making her desert her nest altogether.

"A Squirrel!" said Brian to himself, a little farther on, and stopped dead, hardly daring to breathe lest he should disturb it. It was the first Squirrel he had ever seen; and then, because he stood perfectly still in the shadow of a giant tree-trunk, he was lucky enough to see not merely one, but three all at once.

The first Squirrel was a stranger to Windhover Wood. His real home was in the big Pine-wood some way off, but some days ago he had been feeding in the young plantation



when a man with a gun came along. The more the man looked at the little trees the more he frowned, for many of them were badly damaged by the sharp little teeth of Squirrels. The bark had been peeled off, so that the Squirrels might feast on the sap that rises in the new wood just under the bark. Sometimes a complete ring had been gnawed round the tree, and then the Forester knew that the tip would die, for it is by the young wood that the water and salts sucked from the soil by the roots are carried to every part of the tree; so no wonder he was angry with the Squirrels. He caught a glimpse of the young Squirrel from the Pine-wood, and "bang" went his gun!

The shot missed its mark, but the terrified little animal did not wait for more. Like a red streak he flashed through the grass, never stopping till Windhover Wood swallowed him up. Then he realised that he was far from home, and he wondered what to do. He dared not cross the plantation again, to reach his own Pine-wood. Windhover Wood was strange to him. However, something happened which made him decide to remain there. He saw Russet.

"What is he looking at?" wondered Brian.

The Stranger made a little chattering sound,



and another Squirrel peeped round a Beech-trunk and presently jumped clear from the tree on to a cushion of moss. The Stranger went nearer, and Russet did not run away. Her bright eyes were fixed on him, though once she quivered a little as her sharp ears caught the sound of claws rattling on bark just behind her.

The bold Stranger took another leap towards her, feeling highly pleased with himself; but before he could say much to her, there was an angry cry from the tree above, a sound that meant, "Who on earth are you? What right have you to speak to my Russet?"

An instant later a red-brown fury launched itself out of the tree right on top of the astonished Stranger. With a savage snarl he turned on his attacker, and went for him tooth and claw. But Red-flash had sharp teeth and claws too, and a great rage in his little heart. He would give no quarter to a rival wooer. Russet was to be *his* little mate.

Over and over they went; now the Stranger was on top, now Red-flash. Brown tails lashed from side to side; scraps of fur floated away from the whirling bundle of Squirrel; sometimes little yelps were uttered, then suddenly a

sharp scream of pain. Red-flash's teeth dug deep into the Stranger's neck. With a desperate effort the Stranger freed himself, and fled, whimpering, up the nearest tree, leaving Red-flash scarcely hurt and altogether happy in his victory.

Russet had watched the fight without moving, but now she evidently thought that Red-flash deserved to win her love; and Brian saw the two young Squirrels run away together, high up into the leafy shelter of a big Beech-tree. When he could see them no longer, he ran home to tell his mother all about the great fight.

Red-flash's wooing had been successful, so he and Russet began home-making at once in a hole in an old Beech-tree. The Stranger, nothing daunted by his first defeat, now tried to win Shadow-tail for his mate; but Russet's brother, Bushy-tail, had the same idea in his head, so again the hapless Stranger had to face an angry rival, and Bushy bit him and scratched him so fiercely that at last he ventured to cross the plantation again, and returned to his own Pine-wood. He never wanted to meet these dreadful Windhover Wood Squirrels again in all his life, horrid creatures! So Red-flash and Russet, Bushy and Shadow-tail, left their parents'

homes for ever and set to work to build new ones for themselves.

Red-flash's nest was soon ready, for he chose a deep hole in a tree, and only had to line it warmly with leaves and moss to make a very cosy home indeed. But a short time later he built a second one, a Summer house, in a tall Spruce. This "drey" was made of twigs, with a sheltering roof overhead, but much more lightly built than Ruddy and Stumpy's old nest, which had been made thick and strong to protect the family during the cold months. To this second house Red-flash meant to come in the warm weather. It would be cool and pleasant then, high up there on the Spruce-top.

A month passed. Russet and Red-flash lived very happily together, till one day Russet snarled at her mate when he tried to come into the nest. Red-flash hesitated for a few minutes, then decided to leave her alone if she did not want him, and went off to the "drey" on the Spruce-tree. Next time he went to the Beech-tree nest Russet was as friendly as ever, and she said to him very proudly, "Aren't they beautiful?"

She was looking at her little family, four helpless, blind babies lying among the leaves at the foot of the hole in the old Beech-tree.

They did not look a bit like their pretty, furry parents, for at first they had no hair at all on their feeble little bodies. But they grew rapidly, and soon had soft coats. In a little over a week their eyes opened, and after that they began to take a real interest in things. Russet tended them most carefully, keeping them clean and the nest neat and tidy; she was so busy that sometimes she quite forgot to go out and have her own dinner.

A month is a long time in a wild animal's life. Puff, the little bunny, was a baby no longer. He was growing bigger and bigger every day, and learning more and more from his wise Mother. He knew where the sweetest grass grew, and where to find the purest water to drink. He had learnt the language of Rabbit-thumps, and a hundred dodges to escape his enemies, but he had never yet seen Fire-eyes, the Weasel.

More than a fortnight earlier the two Wood-Pigeon babies had hatched out of the white eggs. Ugly little things they were at first, with big bills always gaping greedily, and with scanty yellowish down on their skins. But very soon they were covered with soft, downy feathers; and they grew bigger very rapidly, which is not surprising, for they ate and ate, as much as

their parents would give them. Their food in the early days was "Pigeon's milk," prepared for them inside their parents' crops. They poked their bills into the parents' mouths to get it. Later, when the Father and Mother Wood-Pigeon returned to the nest with crops full of the spoils of their hunting in the fields, they shared the contents with their children, who were now ready for more solid food than the curdy "milk."

In the trees all around nestlings were cheeping in their comfortable little homes, piping "More food, please!" and by-and-by clamouring to be allowed to see more of the world. They climbed on the edges of the nests, peeped through the leaves at the blue sky, and tried to flap their tiny wings. Some were too venturesome, and under many a tree a poor little bundle of feathers and cold, lifeless flesh told its own pitiful tale. The Mother Wood-Pigeon would not let her babies try their wings until they were strong enough.

When they said, "When shall we fly like you, Mother?" she answered, "Soo-oon! Soo-oon!"

So the babies stayed at home, snug and safe against their Mother's warm sides, and she went on crooning contentedly through the mild Spring days, "Coo-r-r-r-roo! Coo-r-r-r-roo!"



## CHAPTER III

### A MOORLAND RAMBLE

FOR several days low grey clouds had hung heavily over the moorland, and fine rain had been blown, like spray, against the windows. But on Friday the sky cleared. A rather watery sun peeped through the mists; patches of blue appeared and widened; and the river, which had been brown and sullen, flashed back blue and pale gold to the sky.

"We'll be able to go now," Brian had said, joyfully.

He and his father had a splendid plan. They were going to follow the stream to its very source.

On Saturday morning, which was as radiant and as fragrant as a May day can be, Brian sat on the low end of the parapet of the bridge, waiting for his father to come down the path from Windhover. He gazed across the meadows towards the river, thinking of Friday's walk. They had explored the stream below the bridge,

following its snake-like course across the flat stretch of land.

They had seen a brown Water-Vole swim across the stream and disappear under the opposite bank, and had noticed the openings of its tunnels in a steep slope of soft soil. An Orange-tip Butterfly, creamy white except for the vivid tips of its fore-wings, had fluttered across their path and settled on a pale mauve Cuckoo-flower, while over a bed of starry white Stitchworts, and Speedwells bluer than the brightening sky, a Cabbage White Butterfly was flying to and fro. The stream wandered through the grassy meadows, its deeper, swifter side washing against steep banks and eating into the crumbling earth, its shallower edge bordered by flat shelves of fine gravel, which it had itself laid down. Here and there a big stone projected, and changed the course of the stream, gathering a spit of sand on the sheltered side. Then the steeper bank was on the right side instead of the left for a time.

The last few yards of the stream were very swift. It seemed to wake up and throw itself in a joyous rush over the stones into the smooth-flowing river. Brian and his father had pushed



ORANGE-TIP



CABBAGE WHITE

their way through the thicket of Alder-bushes at the mouth of the stream, and stood on the stone-strewn bank of the big river. An Oyster-catcher rose from the stones and flew away, calling shrilly, "Keep! Keep!"

The opposite bank of the river was one sheet of brilliant blue, and the water below reflected the colour of the Lupins. It was a vivid picture, blotting out the greyness of the rainy days—blue sky and blue river, and the still bluer Lupins; gleaming stones, clean and smooth; and the black and white of the startled bird. Still farther off a man was shouting to his horses, and near him was a cloud of birds, Rooks and tumbling Lapwings and a solitary Gull, following the plough.

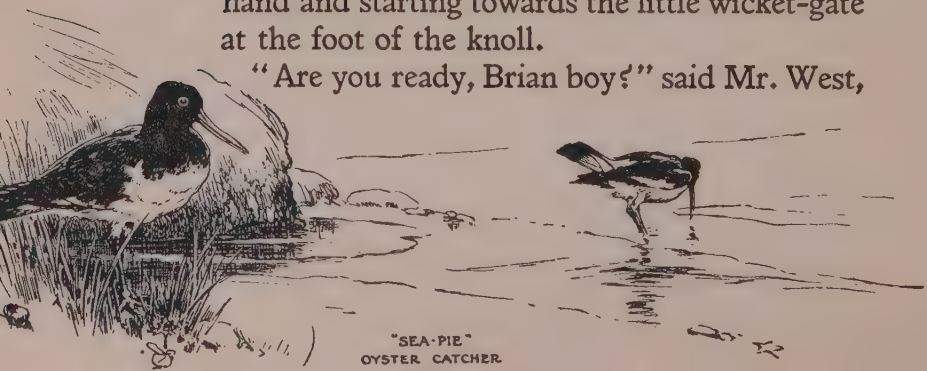
Brian looked round as he heard a slight sound on the road behind him, and shook his head.

"No, Towser," he said, a little sadly, "I'm not going to take any notice of you."

He had long ago discovered that if he was going to get to know the wood-animals he could not be friendly with Farmer Hale's dogs.

"Oh, there's Daddy!" he added, waving his hand and starting towards the little wicket-gate at the foot of the knoll.

"Are you ready, Brian boy?" said Mr. West,



"SEA-PIE"  
OYSTER CATCHER.

as his little son joined him; "got your thick boots on? That's right. Mother has given us lots of sandwiches."

"Shall we cross by the stepping-stones, Daddy?"

"Not to-day; we'll keep to this side of the stream, I think; I went this way a couple of months ago," replied Mr. West; and they set off on the great excursion.

Their path took them through the Bramble-patch, and for a while Brian could not see the stream, but he heard it chuckling among the stones beyond the bushes. Presently they came out into the open, and walked along the top of a grassy bank, gay with Herb Robert and Speedwell. Close to the water were patches of blue Forget-me-nots. Just before they reached the pool, they caught sight of a little dark bird, with a white breast, flitting from stone to stone.

"Why, where has it gone?" exclaimed Brian, suddenly.

"Hush! It may come up again presently," said his father, catching him by the arm. "It is a Dipper, and it can move its wings and hold on to the stones under water. I wish we could see him, but I expect he is looking for insect larvæ or tiny snails on the bed of the stream."

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"There he is!" whispered Brian, as the Dipper appeared and gave itself a little shake.

They watched its jerky flight from stone to stone upstream until it vanished.

"I think its nest is behind the waterfall," said Mr. West; "Dippers often nest in crevices right behind the spray."

Brian would have liked to linger beside the waterfall that splashed down into the deep brown pool. Shadows passing to and fro told of lurking Trout; and the Dipper flew past them again, downstream, while a dainty Wag-tail walked along the edge of the pool. A big grey Heron flew overhead, making for the distant Pine-wood, broad wings flapping slowly, and long legs trailing out behind.

"I wonder if the Heron has been fishing for Frogs?" said Mr. West; "and now come along, Brian, we'll go Frog-hunting too. We'll say good-bye to the stream for a little, and skirt that boggy patch up there."

As they walked along the narrow track that curved away to the left from the top of the waterfall, Mr. West told Brian about his last visit to the bog, about two months earlier.

"It was a fine March day," he said, "and you should have heard the Frogs croaking! They



were pairing in a little pond beside this path; some of them had already laid their eggs, and I could see clumps of them—like jelly full of black specks—floating in the shallow water. And others, perhaps just awake from their Winter rest, were croaking out their love-calls among the tussocks of grass. You won't see any Frogspawn now, for the black specks will have wriggled out as little Tadpoles, with big heads and sideways-flattened tails, just like living commas in the water."

"How long does that take?" Brian asked.

"They hatch out in about a fortnight or a little longer. The jelly protects the eggs at first; it keeps them from being jostled and damaged, and it is so slippery that birds can't gobble it up. When the tiny Tadpoles get free from the jelly they fix themselves on to the water-weeds. Then they begin to show little tufts far forward on the sides of their round bodies; these are the gills for breathing."

"What do they eat, Daddy?"

"Plants at first, then animal food too, anything they can get, and they grow very fast. But here we are at the little pool of water; let us see how they are getting on."

Brian and his father peered into the water,

and there, sure enough, were swarms of black Tadpoles, swimming about among the weeds. Some of them had only hind-legs; but the biggest ones had fore-legs as well, and came up to the surface of the water every now and then.

"Yes," said Mr. West, when Brian pointed this out, "the hind-legs appear first, and by the time the Tadpoles have both pairs they have lungs as well as gills. That is why the big ones keep coming up to the surface. They are past the fish-like stage, and are well on their way to becoming little Frogs. We must come again soon, and you will see that their tails shrivel up, and that the young Frogs leave the water and clamber on to the grass."

Away to the north of the boggy patch the moor rose up into a ridge of low hills, the lowest one topped by a single, wind-bitten Pine, showing black against the blue sky. On the slopes great patches of gorse flamed golden.

"There is quite a deep pool over there," said Mr. West, "below Lone Pine, but we are not going that way to-day. Let us get back to our stream."

On they tramped, sometimes following narrow Rabbit-paths, sometimes wading knee-deep through the heather, bearing towards the right

till they reached the stream again. They were climbing fairly rapidly now, and the stream was rushing along gaily, bounding over many a little ledge and gurgling among the stones. As they crossed a rough stretch, boulder-strewn and fringed with gorse-bushes, they heard a "Chack, chack" sound, like pebbles knocked together, and a Wheatear flitted restlessly ahead of them. It was a black and white and grey bird, with a conspicuous splash of white just above its tail, and a black patch at its eye.

"Do you think it has a nest here, Daddy?" whispered Brian.

"Quite possibly," replied his father; "Wheat-ears do nest among loose stones like these, but I have never found a nest. It is a gay little bird, and it is one of our earliest 'Summer visitors'; it comes here early in April."

A little later they found a grassy knoll beside the stream, from which they could see a long way over the moorland, so there they settled down to have their lunch. The May sun shone bravely, and the sounds of the open were very clear: the gurgle of the stream; the chirrup of a Grasshopper, that seemed very close though they could see no trace of him; the weird cry of a Curlew that flew swiftly overhead, its long

curved bill and lanky legs and large wings showing up boldly against the cloudless sky; and the occasional "Chack, chack" of a Wheatear, or the loud scolding cry of a Grouse and the whirring of its wings.

All at once they noticed a gathering of birds above the slope between the stream and the southern Pine-woods. There was one large bird and quite a crowd of small ones. The large bird flew hither and thither, and the small ones pursued it persistently. They were mobbing it; and at last they drove it off. It rose suddenly and flew swiftly away, and as it passed, Mr. West saw that it was a Cuckoo. So he told Brian how the Cuckoo does not make a nest like other birds, but places her egg in the nest of some smaller bird, such as the Hedge-Sparrow, and how the young Cuckoo throws the other eggs out of the nest, and wears its poor foster-parents quite thin with its ceaseless demands for food and more food.

"I don't know why the little birds combine to mob a Cuckoo," he added, "for of course they don't know what I have just told you. Some people say it is because it is something like a Hawk, and certainly birds do mob Hawks too."

They were not very far from the head of the glen now, and there were hills on three sides of them, though those to the south were not very near. They set out briskly to follow the stream still farther. It was quite a small stream now, and sometimes, where another joined it, it was difficult to say which was the main one. It was a rough scramble up the hillside, but at last they reached a hollow near the top of the hill, and found a number of springs bubbling up from the ground. They had reached the source of the stream.

Brian drew a deep breath as he turned and looked back over the way they had come. He could see the little glen widening out till it lost itself in the open moorland. Here and there a curve of the stream caught the light and glinted silver among the greens and browns of the heather. On his left were the highest hills, and once a large animal crossed the sky-line. It must have been a Red Deer. Below them lay the dark mass of the big Pine-woods, bordering the moor, and stretching away towards his own wood. And there was the green knoll, with Windhover House perched on the top of it!

"Time to go back, sonny!" said Mr. West, and very reluctantly they went down the hill



and set out on the homeward tramp across the moor.

Brian found the cast-off antler of a Stag lying among the heather; and once they paused in the shelter of some gorse-bushes to watch a family of Grouse feeding. There were eight young ones, running to and fro, plucking at the heather shoots and the green tips of the Cranberry plants, and darting eagerly to the big birds if they clucked. The Cock Grouse was scratching up the soil, and when he found a beetle or a grub he called out to the youngsters to come and see. Then they pushed and jostled, trying to secure the tit-bit. But something startled them and they ran off into the thick heather, and Brian and his father could not wait to see if they would come back. Clouds had gathered, and they had to tramp their hardest to reach home before dusk.

The sky was turning grey and the moor was full of shadows, but still a Kestrel hovered, keen eyes searching the ground. A sudden swoop, and sharp claws closed on a hapless Mouse. Over the stony ground a Wheatear flitted, carrying a grub in her beak. Her five pale blue eggs had hatched out already, and there were five hungry mouths to fill. Beside the pool,

dark brown now with no golden gleams, the Wren-like song of the Dipper sounded for a moment, clear and sweet above the rush of the waterfall.

Close to the bridge below Windhover knoll pale Moths fluttered ghost-like over the fragrant Hawthorn blossom in the hedges. Farther down, in the quiet meadows, a Water-Vole sat at the doorway of one of her burrows, gnawing a root. Her young ones were fast asleep. Having finished the root, she ran up the bank and made for the fields, slipping quietly through the grass. She was rather like a Rat, but her tail was shorter and her ears were very low, and her head was much broader.

Everything was quiet down beside the river except for the swish of the water. Suddenly there was a splutter and a puff, sounding loud in the stillness, and a round head appeared below the river-bank. Something glittered between the jaws. The Otter, most skilful of fishers, had caught another victim. A few minutes later she entered the mouth of the stream and ran up a little way, a lithe, swift-moving grey shadow. Distance was nothing to her; more than once, when fishing was poor, she had gone right upstream to the moor, and

carried off a young Grouse, or even condescended to a Frog from the marsh. This time, however, she seemed to change her mind, or perhaps something startled her, for she wheeled suddenly, clambered up the bank, and made for the river at a gallop across a corner of the meadow. She entered the water with a sliding dive down the bank, making no splash, scarcely causing a ripple.

Away northwards she went, on her return journey up the river, past the danger zone of the farm-lands to the wilder country that lay beyond. She reached her own home pool and scrambled up the steep bank. She looked dark and sleek, and showers of drops fell from her dripping coat. She looked round her when she reached a flat place on top of the bank and uttered a strange cry. In a moment three little Otters came running out of a thicket by a track bounded by Brambles and Sweet-briers. They fell upon the fish she had brought home, eating the head first of all, and after that they gambolled round her and she joined in their play.

The cubs were getting quite big now, for they had been born during the winter. Blind, downy, helpless babes they were at first, and the mother only left them to get food for herself, so that she might give them a supply of milk. On sunny

mornings she used to lift them gently out of the cosily-lined nest in the bank, and let them blink their newly-opened eyes in the winter sunshine. When they were two months old she taught them to swim in the pool, and they did not take long to learn. Now they had had many other lessons. They knew how to catch and eat a fish, how to skin a frog, or deal with a bird. They knew when to hide and when to run; and they knew that they must obey their mother in all things. She was quick to punish an unruly cub; but she was ready, too, to join in a frolic on the quiet bank above the peaceful pool.

In the house on the knoll little Brian lay fast asleep. What did he know of the hunters of the night? Unseen by him, the Otters roved and the Fox slipped out of the wood; the Bats darted to and fro in the twilight, and the Brown Owl swooped low over the fields where the Field-Mice cowered. Falling night hid the moorland, and the woods were a black blur against the darkening sky, but not all the wild animals were asleep. Many strange shapes with glowing eyes moved among the shadows.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE POND IN THE PINE-WOOD

BRIAN whistled a gay little tune as he buckled up his knapsack, which was bulging with fruit and sandwiches. He tapped the barometer for the tenth time that morning. It was quite steady.

"A good day for exploring, Brian," said his mother, smiling.

"Grand! Roger is very keen about it too," said Brian, as he put on his knapsack. "Ready, Daddy?"

"Coming!" called a voice from upstairs.

A few minutes later Brian and his father were striding down the knoll by the main path.

"We are early," said Mr. West; "we need not walk the whole way to Dr. Brown's by the road. Shall we cross the fields to the river?"

When they had crossed the bridge they climbed over the end of the parapet, dropped into the meadow, and cut across to a small path that ran along the top of the river-bank. The river flowed smoothly between high grassy banks, with here and there a clump of Willow-trees



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that dipped their lower branches in the water. In a field on the other side some Lambs were gambolling, and a little shaggy Shetland Pony raised his head to look across at them.

A Swallow skimmed over the river, nearly touching the ripples as it caught a hovering insect in its gaping mouth. It rose again, wheeled gracefully, and darted back. Brian could see its long tail-streamers and the wide curve of its wings.

"I think there are Sand-Martins nesting in the sand-bank below Windhover Wood," said Mr. West; "I saw a bird not unlike a small Swallow, but with duller plumage, fly into a little hole in the bank yesterday. Sand-Martins build their nests in tunnels in places like that."

"There are Swallows nesting under the eaves of the barn at Moor-end Farm," said Brian.

Every now and then the stillness was broken by the cry of a bird, first the harsh note of a Corncrake that was hidden somewhere in a field across the river, and then the shrill "Pee-wit!" of a Lapwing close at hand. The Lapwing alighted for a moment on the grass, and Brian saw the long curved crest on his head. He rose and circled over the field again, tumbling curiously in his flight.

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"I expect there was a nest here earlier in the year," said Mr. West; "I have found Lapwings' eggs in April in rough fields just like this. Lapwings hardly make a nest at all, just lay the eggs in a hollow in the ground, but they are not easily found because they are speckled brownish eggs that don't show up. The chicks can run about directly they are hatched, and they are mottled brown too."

They walked on till they came to another little path that curved away towards the road, but before going along it they decided to sit in the shade of the bushes on the bank and watch the river for a few minutes. The water was clear and shallow, not more than a foot deep just below the bank. Waving green water-weeds were growing up from the sandy bed. A little farther down the bank was much lower, and there was a patch of reeds nearly on the level of the flat field. The water swished gently through the spear-like reeds. They trembled and rustled ceaselessly.

As Brian gazed into the water he saw a tiny fish swim past. From its mouth hung a long streamer of narrow grass. It disappeared in the muddier water beside the reeds.

"Was that a Stickleback, Daddy?" asked Brian.

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"Yes," said Mr. West, "he was taking something to add to his nest. He builds a nest among the water-weeds, of grass and roots bound together with gluey threads. It is a barrel-shaped nest with a door at one end. It is fixed near the bottom of a quiet pool. When it is ready he goes in search of a mate, and brings her proudly to the nest. But she doesn't take the slightest interest in the home. She lays her eggs in it and then hurries away, and she doesn't even go out by the door, she just breaks through the wall, making a new back door!"

"What does the poor Stickleback do then?"

"He tidies up the nest, and stays near it to watch over the eggs. He also tries to get another mate and another, but he does everything himself. He keeps the eggs clean, and drives away intruders very fiercely, even though he is such a little fellow. By-and-by the young Sticklebacks hatch out, but the father's cares are by no means over, for the little ones always try to get out of the nest, and as often as he drives them in at the front door they slip out again at the back."

"I suppose other fish try to snap up the babies?" said Brian.

"Yes, they do, but the Father Stickleback is

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quite ready to attack a fish a good deal bigger than himself if it interferes with his family. I hear something singing among the reeds, Brian; listen!"

A Sedge-Warbler was singing a little babbling song, but they did not see him, for he was hidden by the thick reeds. Presently his song changed; he whistled and piped and trilled, in imitation of other birds. The sound was very clear and sweet for a few moments, then suddenly the hidden singer was silent.

"Come, Brian," said Mr. West, rising, "Roger will think we have forgotten him."

They took the path to the road, and when they came out of the fields quite near Dr. Brown's house, there was Roger waiting for them, for they had promised to take him with them when they went to see the Pond in the heart of the big Pine-wood.

They walked past Dr. Brown's house, but did not go as far as the village; instead, they turned aside and struggled through the tangle of shrubs and long grass that divided the Pine-wood from the road. They had to walk warily, for there were patches of Nettles and tall, prickly Thistles among the thick growth. Many of the Thistles were flecked with foam, and

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Brian stopped to lift off one of the frothy masses on his finger.

"Cuckoo-spit!" said Roger.

When Brian spread out the foam he found a little blunt-headed, yellowish-green insect in the middle.

"That is a young 'Frog-hopper,' a plant-sucking insect," said Mr. West.

"He has got brown eyes," said Brian; "oh, Roger, you've knocked him off."

The two boys followed Mr. West out of the tangle, and sat down beside him on the bank at the edge of the Pine-wood.

"The little Frog-hoppers are quite cool and safe in the froth," said Mr. West. "Birds don't like it, and the sun doesn't dry it up till the insects are full-grown, and can fly and leap about."

"Where does the froth come from?" Brian asked.

"The Frog-hopper makes its own soap-bubbles; it sucks the sweet juices from the plant, and with some of this sap and a little wax to stiffen it, it beats up the froth with its tail."

They sat silent for a few moments, looking down at the frothy splashes on the Thistles



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glistening in the sunlight. In the distance they heard the call of a Cuckoo.

"Why is the froth called 'Cuckoo-spit'?" asked Roger.

"I don't know," said Mr. West, "unless it is because it is common about the time we hear the Cuckoo. You don't find much of it after midsummer. For by that time the bubble-blowers have got wings and flown away."

At the edge of the wood they found a large stone surrounded by fragments of snails' shells. A Song-Thrush had evidently been at work at its anvil, breaking the shells against the stone to get at the juicy mouthful inside. It was very cool and quiet in the shade of the tall Pines. Their footsteps scarcely made a sound as they walked over the thick carpet of Pine-needles. They seldom heard the song of a bird, except the drowsy cooing of Wood-Pigeons, and the occasional call of the male Cuckoo.

Once Mr. West stooped to pull aside some moss round the foot of a tree, and when they looked under it they saw several small insects with pure white bodies and reddish-brown legs. Brian pointed out that one of the largest had a white, oblong trailer attached to the hinder end of the body.

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"That is her trailer," said his father; "you might almost call it a perambulator, for she carries her babies inside it."

Sometimes, as they walked through the wood, they found narrow paths, and followed them for a little while; but the paths usually lost themselves among the Pine-needles, and they wandered on till at last they heard the rustle of a small stream.

"That stream comes out near the village," said Roger.

"It comes from the Pond, so if we follow it up we shall soon get there," said Mr. West.

It was a very small stream, scarcely more than a trickle of water between low banks, and it flowed with a soft murmur over its sandy bed. They followed its twists and turns among the trees till they saw before them a green patch of reeds and bushes, and the glimmer of water showing through the gaps.

They found a clear space among the bushes, and sat down on the grassy bank quite close to the water. It was not a big Pond, and it was almost a perfect circle. Very little breeze reached it in this sheltered spot, and the unruffled surface mirrored the tall dark Pines and the vivid greens round the margin.

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As they neared the Pond a solitary Heron, that had been standing motionless among the reeds, rose and flew over the trees. They saw the big grey bird flapping slowly away.

"I believe there is a Heronry in this wood, nearer the moor," said Mr. West, "where a number of pairs of Herons nest close together every Summer. They build platforms of twigs high up in the trees."

"I have seen Herons fishing on the marsh on the moor," said Brian.

Near the edge of the Pond they could see a number of Whirligig-Beetles swimming on the surface of the water. They looked black, but when a sunbeam fell on one it glinted with metallic greens and blues. They skated rapidly in circles, occasionally diving below the surface or jumping into the air.

"Their eyes are divided," explained Mr. West, "one half looks up into the air for flies, while the other is scanning the water below for grubs. Their bodies are covered with tiny hairs which entrap bubbles of air, so that when the Beetles dive under water they carry with them enough air to last for a short time. Another Water-Beetle has an air-space under its wing-covers, where the openings of its breathing-

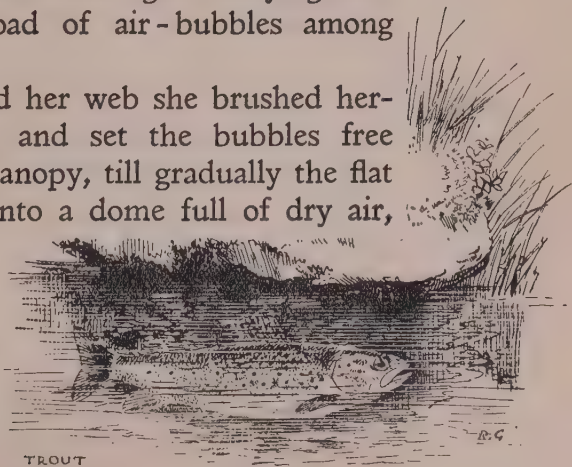
## THE POND IN THE PINE-WOOD 53

tubes are, so that it can remain under water for several minutes without coming up to breathe."

While Mr. West and the two boys ate their lunch, they watched the Gnats dancing above the Pond, and saw the occasional flash of a jumping Trout. The splash it made sounded loud in the quiet heart of the big wood. They did not see very much of the busy life of the Pond, though they noticed signs of it,—a dimple on the water where some creature rose to breathe, and a tiny spot of light as a Water-Spider climbed down a silken thread, and was lost in the blurred green of the water.

The Water-Spider had spun a tent-like web at the bottom of the Pond, and fixed it to the weeds. It was buoyed up by air, which she had brought down from the surface. Time after time she climbed her silken rope to the surface, where she had fastened it to a reed, and time after time she climbed down again carrying with her a glistening load of air-bubbles among her hairs.

When she reached her web she brushed herself with her legs, and set the bubbles free beneath the silken canopy, till gradually the flat web had risen up into a dome full of dry air,



TROUT

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making a safe place for a nursery for tiny Water-Spiders.

A Pied-Wagtail was walking daintily along the edge of the Pond, jerking its long tail up and down, and pausing every now and then to pick a little Water-Snail off the stem of a reed. Over the reeds a Dragonfly was hovering; its outstretched, transparent wings gleamed with rainbow tints in the sunlight, and its body was brilliantly blue.

On the surface of the water there was a ceaseless scurrying to and fro of Water-Bugs. There were the long, thin Water-Measurers, darting about on long black legs, and catching tiny insects and sucking their juices. There were sluggish Water-Scorpions an inch long, with strong pincers for seizing their prey, that occasionally came to the surface to take in air through two breathing-tubes at the tail end of the body.

Water-Boatmen were there too in considerable numbers, rowing themselves over the water with the hind pair of legs, which were longer than the others. They swam upside down, keeping a look-out for other swimmers, and often wounding creatures bigger than themselves.

Above the surface-skaters was a swarm of



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Gnats and gauze-winged May-flies, dancing up and down in the sun-warmed air. A few weeks before, little packets of Gnats' eggs had floated like tiny rafts on the quiet Pond. From the eggs had come wriggling little grubs that swam about and ate pieces of water-weed. They spent most of the time hanging head downwards from the surface of the water, because they breathed by tubes that opened at their tails. Three times they changed the firm covering over the living skin as they grew too big for their old husks; then at the fourth moult they changed their form as well, and became pupæ with breathing-tubes on their big heads. The pupa was the last stage of the Gnat's youthful life in the water, and when it split open a winged insect struggled out. Each Gnat drew itself gently out of the pupa husk, and poising itself on the discarded covering, stretched its wings and flew up into the air.

The May-flies too had begun their life in the water. For two or three years they had lived at the bottom of the Pond, feeding and growing, and casting their outer husks or cuticles many times, till at last they had emerged as perfect insects with delicate wings. In some cases they had only one day of life in the air. In a few

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hours they would be gone, but the mothers would have laid their eggs in the water before they died.

Mr. West and the boys spent the whole afternoon near the Pond, watching the insects and talking of many things. Brian wandered a little way into the wood and found a heap of Pine-needles.

"Oh, Daddy," he shouted, "here's a big Ant-hill."

Roger and Mr. West came at once to see the nest, and for a long time they all watched the Ants at work. They came out of holes in the heap of Pine-needles, and hurried away. They seemed to have regular roads, for they came and went in orderly streams. Some were bringing home food, others carrying bits of leaves and fragments of stick to add to the nest. Brian stirred part of the heap slightly with a twig. Immediately there was confusion. Ants ran in every direction, many of them carrying white bundles in their mouths.

"These are the cocoons," said Mr. West, "inside each white silk bag there is a young Ant."

Before very long it became clear that there was some order in the scurrying to and fro, for the precious white bundles were rapidly vanishing. The Ants were taking them to safety in the

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heart of the nest. Moreover, other bands of Ants were already at work repairing the damaged heap.

At last Mr. West said they must go home, so they walked back to the edge of the wood. Roger said good-bye, and scrambled down to the road; then Brian and his father walked along the fringe of the Pine-wood till they came to the beginning of Windhover Wood with its mixture of Beeches, Oaks, Spruces and other trees.

The sound of the Wood-Pigeons cooing broke the evening stillness, and they saw a number of their nests among the branches. But one of these was not occupied by Wood-Pigeons now; it had been taken over by a pair of Kestrels. One of the birds flew away as Brian and his father came near. They had a glimpse of its slate-blue head, brown body, and greyish tail before it cleared the branches.

"I wonder if there are eggs in the nest," said Brian.

"There may even be young birds by this time," said Mr. West, as they walked on.

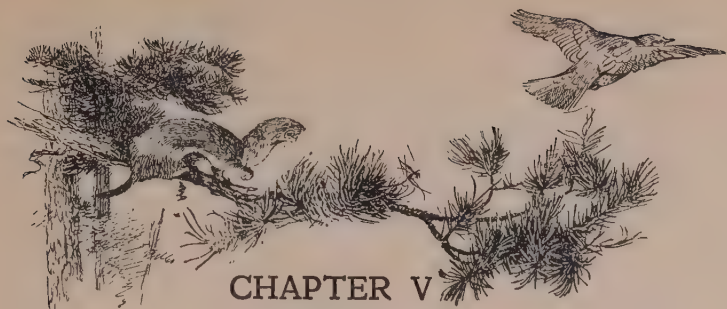
He was right. After they had gone, the Kestrels returned to the nest, first the mother bird, carrying a Mouse in her strong, curved beak; and next the father bird, with a half-plucked Hedge-Sparrow. There were four nestlings waiting

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to be fed. The Mother Kestrel had laid four brick-red eggs in April in the nest a pair of Wood-Pigeons had deserted, and now she had a family that was always clamouring for food.

The sun went down. The dance of the May-flies became languid. The leaping fish caught them, and birds flying low across the Pond snapped them up; others fell into the water and drifted towards the little stream that slipped away into the gathering darkness. The May-flies' day of dancing and of love was over. Instead, as evening stole on, came Caddis-flies with Moth-like wings, to flutter across the silent pool. They too had spent their youth below the water, creeping on the bed of the stream, with their soft bodies tucked into strange cases covered with sticks and grains of sand.

Before darkness fell, a mother and her son visited the Pond. She was light brown, with dark eyes that roved restlessly and tried to pierce the shadows; the little one, pressing closely to her side, was flecked with white. The Mother Red Deer, satisfied that all was safe, stooped to drink, and her month-old Fawn lowered his little head beside hers. A moment later they had turned and trotted quietly away into the darkness of the big Pine-wood.



## CHAPTER V

### STUMPY'S FLITTING

AS the days grew warmer Brian spent more and more time exploring the country-side. On Saturdays he and his father often tramped over the moor, or wandered along the banks of the river; while on other weekdays, as soon as his lessons were over, he hurried to Windhover Wood. Sometimes, when his father was going away for the day, they had breakfast so early that Brian had time to pay a visit to the wood on his way to Dr. Brown's. One such morning, in the middle of June, he saw something that gave him a new idea of the life of the wood-folk. By this time he knew a good deal about the ways of Rabbits; and he had seen enough of the Squirrels to be able to picture their family-life in their tree-top home. He knew when the fledglings had left the nest in Hazel-bush and Spruce-tree; and he had found traces



that told of the sad ending of many a little life. But this morning the grim hunter was at work.

Brian had been sitting perfectly still for some time on a fallen tree-trunk. He was almost hidden by an overhanging bush, but he could see quite well. This was a favourite spot of his; for this part of the wood seemed to be the Squirrels' special haunt, and he was sure to see one or other of them if he was very quiet and patient. But this was no Squirrel that came leaping and bounding over the moss that fair June morning! Brown he was, and very lithe and nimble, but he was smaller than a Squirrel, and his tail was very short. He seemed to be looking from side to side as he leaped into the air. Presently he paused, and sniffed once or twice, then leaped again. He no longer went forward, though his bounds and leaps and twists never ceased. His spare, sinuous body curved itself in a most amazing way. Strange indeed were his antics on that mossy patch!

Brian had been watching the curious performance for a full minute before he realised that he was not the only onlooker, for a ring of small birds had formed round the tumbling animal. Chaffinches, Tits and Wrens were staring spell-bound, while a little way off crouched a young Rabbit, with wide dark eyes fixed on the

acrobat. So it came about that Brian and Puff first saw Fire-eyes, the Weasel.

Over and over he went, leaping and twisting in ever wilder movements. The fascinated birds never moved. Nearer and nearer went the Weasel, apparently intent on his play, but with a deadly purpose in his mind. The end came suddenly—a well-aimed spring, a flash of sharp teeth, a pitiful flutter of feathers, and a Chaffinch lay still on the moss. Puff, the Rabbit, shivered with fear. The spell was broken. He turned and ran for his life.

“Oh, he hasn’t even eaten it!” said Brian to himself, as he saw the Weasel turn away from the dead bird, and run a little way into the wood.

The Weasel’s eyes were glowing red, his keen nose sniffed the air. The joy of the hunt thrilled him through and through. High up on a Beech-tree he had seen a spot of brown, moving among the leafy branches. Silently he slipped forward, and the Squirrel-scent grew stronger.

Now it happened that when Red-flash and his sister, Shadow-tail, both left the old home, and found mates and started new homes for themselves, their parents, Ruddy and Stumpy, had set to work to make a new nest, and now had a large family of very young babies in the Beech-tree. It was Ruddy that Fire-eyes had caught

sight of, on his own home tree. No animal is more silent than the Weasel, and even Ruddy, who had lived amid the dangers of the wood for several years, did not hear him till he was quite close. With a sharp cry of fear and warning he sprang away. He was too wise to go near his nest; so, while Stumpy cowered low over her little ones, he raced along the branches, and jumped to the next tree.

From his hidden corner Brian got a glimpse of the chase. On went Ruddy, ever farther from his home, up tree and down tree, from branch to branch, swift and sure-footed. But Fire-eyes was never far behind. Ruddy ran out to the very tip of a branch, high up above the ground. It swayed with his weight. He turned and looked at his pursuer, following hard after him. Fire-eyes was within a yard of him, when Ruddy jumped. It was an amazing jump, from a giddy height, but the Squirrel's bushy tail acted as a sort of parachute, and he landed unhurt. Fire-eyes hesitated, then ran back and down the tree-trunk a little way before he too jumped. This gave Ruddy a little advantage, but Fire-eyes shot over the ground, with his body straight and low, and when Ruddy paused again in the shelter of a spreading Spruce, the Weasel was just behind him.

The chase went on. Ruddy was getting flurried and did not choose his way so carefully. Again and again he came back to the same place. He was the better jumper of the two, and might have beaten his enemy if he had kept to the tree-tops, but time after time he returned to the ground. Tireless, relentless, the Weasel kept on, intent on his hunting, scarcely glancing at his prey, but never losing his trail for an instant. He was not really hungry, but his blood was up, and it was an exciting hunt. The Squirrel was worthy game; this was better than eating birds' eggs, or catching Mice in the fields. On went Ruddy. He was a strong and active Squirrel, but terror was beginning to numb his limbs. Once again he left the trees and raced along the ground, his beautiful tail streaming behind him; and on the ground he was beaten. Fire-eyes took a mighty bound forward. His teeth closed with a snap on the Squirrel's neck. A moment later he slipped silently away, leaving again a scarcely touched victim; but Ruddy's gallant little heart throbbed no more.

As the Weasel ran off, intent no doubt on more hunting, Brian left his hiding-place and hurried through the wood, cutting across it

towards the road. He was feeling rather puzzled and very sorrowful; but he knew that he had already stayed too long, so he tried to forget the animals for a while and make up for lost time. He scrambled down a sand-bank on to the road, and set off at a run for Dr. Brown's house. When he got there Elsie and Roger were already doing their sums, and he was scolded for being late.

When Brian returned home at dinner-time, he poured out the whole story to his mother, ending up with an indignant outburst: "I think the Weasel is a horrible, cruel, wicked animal!"

Mrs. West shook her head.

"It is no use looking at it like that, Brian," she said; "the Weasel is leading its natural life just as much as any of the other animals. It happens to be a hunter, instead of living on grass and nuts and roots and things of that sort."

"But it didn't *eat* the animals I saw it kill," protested Brian.

"No; they do kill many more than they actually eat, I know. They seem to enjoy hunting for its own sake—they are not alone in that!—but even that may be explained by an instinct for storing, handed down from harder times."



"I don't quite understand, Mother."

"Well," Mrs. West explained, "for instance, a Weasel will often kill a number of Rats in a barn and pile them up in a heap, and if there is a very severe winter it will come back to them when it is hungry. But if it can find fresh meat, it won't bother about the Rats any more. Lots of animals do things we find difficult to understand, but very often it was necessary for their ancestors to do these things, and the instinct to do them still lives in the animals we know."

Brian thought about this for a few minutes.

"All the same," he said at last, "I like the Squirrels best."

Mrs. West smiled. "So do I, Brian," she said, "but I admire the Weasel too. He is a clever little fellow, even if he is rather blood-thirsty; besides, I don't know what would happen if we had no hunting animals. We should be overrun with Mice, for one thing! All animals have enemies. The weak ones are hunted down, and the fittest are often left to be the fathers and mothers of the next lot of animals."

"I am sure there is a Squirrels' nest up that Beech-tree," said Brian.

"Then I hope the Mother Squirrel and the babies are safe," said Mrs. West. "I expect

there is a nest of Weasels in the wood too, in some old tree-stump. Weasels are splendid mothers, and educate their little ones very carefully."

Brian laughed.

"Oh, Mother," he cried, "I believe you are teasing me!"

"No, I'm not, Brian, I only want you to look at wild life in the proper way. Now, come along, and we'll sit out in the garden for a while."

After tea Brian went down to the wood again. He knew that in the heat of the day he would not have seen many animals, but now in the late afternoon they would be beginning to come out in search of their evening meal. He crossed the stream by the stepping-stones, and stood for a few minutes in the shadow of a Larch-tree to watch the Rabbits in the warren; but he was anxious to see something of the Squirrel family, so he soon turned away, and walked quietly into the mixed wood, till he was quite near the big Beech-tree where Fire-eyes had first seen Ruddy that morning.

He found a hiding-place, and sat down to wait and watch. Before very long there was a slight rustle, and a spot of red-brown showed against the grey trunk of the tree. It was Stumpy.

Down she came, cautiously, slowly, listening fearfully. Something limp and brown dangled from her mouth—one of her own babies. On the ground she put it down for an instant, to change her hold on the skin of its neck, then she hurried off as fast as she could with her burden. Brian dared not follow for fear of frightening her, so he could not see where she went.

He sat quite still, listening to the birds in the branches overhead, and before long back came Stumpy. She was running and leaping quite quickly now, for she no longer carried the young Squirrel, but still she kept a keen watch, and sniffed the air suspiciously. As a matter of fact she was in no danger just then, for Fire-eyes, who had finished his hunting that morning by eating the greater part of a young Hare, was now lying in a deep sleep in a hole in a tree some way off. But Stumpy did not know this; all she knew was that the Weasel had set foot on their own Beech and given chase to Ruddy, and that her mate had not come back. So she knew that their home was discovered, and that her precious young ones were not safe there.

Up the tree she flashed, and presently came down again with another baby in her mouth

and disappeared with it into the heart of the wood. A third and a fourth baby went the same way, and still Stumpy came again. She moved very slowly with the fifth, and set it down several times, as though her jaws were tired; but she kept on, patiently, bravely, and once more disappeared among the trees. She did not come back. Brian sat on for a long time, listening and watching, while the sun sank down in the west, and the shadows lengthened. Then he rose slowly and stretched his stiff limbs, for he knew that Stumpy must have finished her "flitting."

"Five babies!" he murmured; "I wonder where she has taken them, poor brave little Mother Squirrel."

But Brian was wrong. Stumpy had moved two babies before he saw her, and now her large family of seven was asleep in a new home. She had rejected Ruddy's summer "drey" in a neighbouring tree as being too near the danger spot, and had decided instead to "flit" farther into the wood. No home was ready there for her family, but a discarded Wood-Pigeon nest served as a shelter. It was only a rough platform of sticks, for the Wood-Pigeon is not much of a builder; but the June night was warm, and

the babies would not suffer. Stumpy spread her tail over them, and, curling up her weary body, fell into fitful slumber. Tired as she was, the fear of cruel eyes glowing in the darkness made the devoted mother the lightest of sleepers. But Fire-eyes slept on, and peace reigned in the tree-tops.

Every day Brian came to Windhover Wood to see if he could find out what had become of the Mother Squirrel with the large family, but never a trace did he see of them till the very end of June. He was almost sure that some Squirrels had their home in a Spruce-tree that he often passed; and this was quite true, for Red-flash had left his first home in the hole, and brought Russet and the young ones to the Summer "drey" on the top of the tall Spruce-tree. But Stumpy had built a new nest in a Fir with spreading branches right in the middle of the wood, just beside the tree where she had taken shelter in the Wood-Pigeon's nest. She had used the sticks from the bird's nest to give the finishing touches to the new home.

One bright morning, towards the close of a very fine, warm June, Brian was walking through the



BRAMBLE  
IN  
JUNE



wood. He had learnt to move very quietly and to pause often. His footsteps made very little sound on the mossy, Pine-needle-strewn path. He stopped to listen and to look about him. All at once he caught sight of one of the prettiest scenes imaginable.

Looking through an archway of leafy boughs he could see a dark old Fir-tree, and on its branches were several red-brown Squirrels. Stumpy was teaching her young ones to jump—not all of them, seven was too large a family to take out all together, so she told four of them to lie low in the nest. The other three were clinging to the Fir branches. They were about a month old now, and being Summer youngsters they had bright reddish coats and pure white waistcoats, but no tufts on their ears. Stumpy showed them how she could jump from one branch to an outspread branch lower down the tree. Then, sitting up erect, she called to them to follow. They had been taught to obey. One after the other they jumped, one in an untidy bundle, another neatly with legs apart and tail well fluffed up, the third so carelessly that he nearly fell to the ground. So they all had to do it again.

Stumpy gave a sharp cry, and at once they

all scurried up the tree and tumbled into the nest. For a few minutes all was still; then out they came again. Perhaps she was only testing them to see how quickly they would obey orders, for she soon emerged, followed by three young ones, and the jumping and climbing lessons began again. They took bigger and bigger jumps as they grew bolder, sometimes landing flat on their little white waistcoats, sometimes just catching a branch with the claws of one foot, and pulling themselves up with difficulty to a safe position.

Two of them ventured to go for a short run on the ground, and Stumpy watched them for a moment before she called them back to the tree. Once or twice one pushed another playfully, or ran up to Stumpy and tried to sit close to her on the branch; but all the time she seemed to be on the alert, and once when one of the young ones did not come when she called she caught him by the scruff of the neck, shook him, and carried him back to the nest and dropped him in.

"Get in there, you bad Squirrel!" she said, quite crossly, and then came swinging and jumping down the tree to the other two.

In his eagerness to see more of the charming

scene Brian had crept forward step by step, hiding behind the tree-trunk, so that now he could hear the slight scratching of claws on the bark and the little sounds the Squirrels made when they spoke to each other. He could see their little pointed faces, with the bright black eyes; he could guess what they were saying.

"Oh, it's too far to jump, Mother!"

"You do what I tell you, my son!"

One step more; he was very near now. Stumpy turned her head and looked at him. She gave a quick order, and the two young Squirrels disappeared among the leaves. She followed them, not very quickly; she did not seem to be alarmed. Perhaps she had watched Brian before, and knew him to be harmless. All the same, she had to be careful, so she moved away. From the shelter of the Fir-tree she looked curiously down on the quiet little boy till he turned and strolled away. He was smiling; he wanted to whistle. He felt so happy because the Mother Squirrel's "flitting" had been a success.

And was Ruddy quite forgotten? Who can tell? Seven frisky, adventurous, month-old babies are quite enough for one little Mother Squirrel to think about!



## CHAPTER VI

### A NIGHT IN THE WOODS

THE week when Dick Terry camped near Windhover was the happiest of that whole happy Summer for Brian. They met for the first time on the day when Brian's holidays began. He was coming home from Dr. Brown's, gaily swinging his strapped books, when he caught sight of his mother talking to a tall, sunburnt youth at the little wicket-gate. He crossed the bridge and ran along the stream-side path towards them.

"Well, Brian, lessons all over?" said Mrs. West. "This is Dick Terry."

"I am camping out over there," the stranger explained, waving his hand in the direction of the warren.

"How jolly!" said Brian, "I wish *I* could camp out. Do you see the animals at night?"

"Lots of them! Would you like to see my sketch-book? I have been lucky lately, and it is nearly full of sketches of animals I have seen."

In a very short time Brian and Dick were firm friends, and for a week they rambled about the country-side together, or sat in the woods watching the Rabbits and Squirrels, or lay full-length on the sun-warmed heather gazing up at the sky. Brian was never tired of hearing Dick's stories and turning over the pages of his book of clever sketches. The week passed all too quickly, and the last day came. Brian was very sorry to think that the next morning the tent would be gone from the corner of the wood, and that Dick would not be waiting at the wicket-gate for him to come down the knoll, ready for a tramp over the moor.

"Oh, Mother," he said, sadly, as he sat down at the dinner-table, "only one more afternoon with Dick."

"I am afraid I can't let you go out this afternoon——" began Mrs. West.

"Mother!"

"Wait a moment, Brian," she said, laughing; "Dick has just asked me to let you spend the night in his camp, so I want you to have a nap in the hammock this afternoon, for I'm afraid there won't be much sleep to-night."

"A night in the woods!" cried Brian, excitedly, "how perfectly splendid!"



After tea Brian went down to the camp, but he and Dick did not stay there long, as they had to buy some provisions in the village before the shops closed. By the time Dick's knapsack was full, and they were tramping back along the road, it was already evening. The rosy glimmer was fading from the smooth surface of the river, and the creeping grey of dusk was veiling the last pale flames of sunset.

Over the meadows, where the Dock-seeds showed red among the long grass, white Moths were dancing, while clouds of tiny Midges had gathered above the road. The hedges were starred with flowers, for, though the Hawthorns now bore clusters of hard green fruits, the wild Roses were still dropping frail petals on the tangle of purple Vetch and fragrant Thyme among the grasses below.

"Look!" cried Brian in surprise, and stopped short.

He hardly knew how he was to walk any farther, without crushing out a life at every step, for they had come upon a great company of Froglings on the march. Each wanderer was scarcely bigger than a man's finger-nail, but they were there in such numbers that the dusty road seemed alive with them. They had come,

no doubt, from some distant breeding-pool, but their journey's end was very near. Rich feeding-grounds awaited them in the dewy meadows, where the Summer crowds of insects were swarming in myriads.

Brian and Dick picked their way carefully through the ranks of the hopping travellers, and walked on below the high sand-banks at the edge of Windhover Wood. Bats were flying to and fro in the twilight, in pursuit of the Gnats and Midges. They passed so quickly that Brian only saw them as darting shadows, that circled round overhead and vanished into the wood, to reappear a moment later against the grey of the sky. Close to the trees they went, flying at full speed, but never touching a branch. They seemed to feel the nearness of every object, and steered clear of it without pausing in their rapid flight.

"Wonderful wings they've got," said Dick; "have you ever seen one asleep?"

"No," said Brian; "what do they look like?"

"Quaint dried-up little bundles of skin and bone, with just a tiny furry body," Dick answered. "You must look out for them in Winter; you are sure to find some sleeping in Hale's barn. The wings stretch along the

arms and between the long fingers and down to the legs, leaving only the thumbs and the feet and the very tip of the tail free. They look dry and leathery, but really they are extremely sensitive. Look at those two! You might think there would be a collision, but there won't be!"

They did not follow the road as far as the bridge, but attacked the sand-bank boldly and, in spite of sliding back several times and getting their shoes full of sand, were soon in the wood. They walked slowly and quietly, threading their way in and out among the tree-trunks as silently as Red Indians following the trail, though now and then Dick stooped to whisper in Brian's ear.

"I hope we see that Fox," he said, softly, and Brian's eyes shone with excitement.

They were not far from the fringe of the mixed wood; only the little plantation of young Pines lay between them and the moor, when Brian felt Dick's fingers close on his arm in a warning grip. He stood quite still, peering into the shadows. Something was moving a little way in front of them, scuffling among the twigs and undergrowth and sometimes uttering low sounds. It was Reynard the Fox. To and fro he went, making occasional uncertain dabs at something

among the grasses at the edge of the plantation. It was difficult to say whether he was playing or hunting. Whichever it was, he tired of it suddenly and ran off, with an easy loping stride, towards the Rabbit warren.

Dick and Brian crept forward just in time to see a Hedgehog unroll itself and trot placidly away towards a tree-stump.

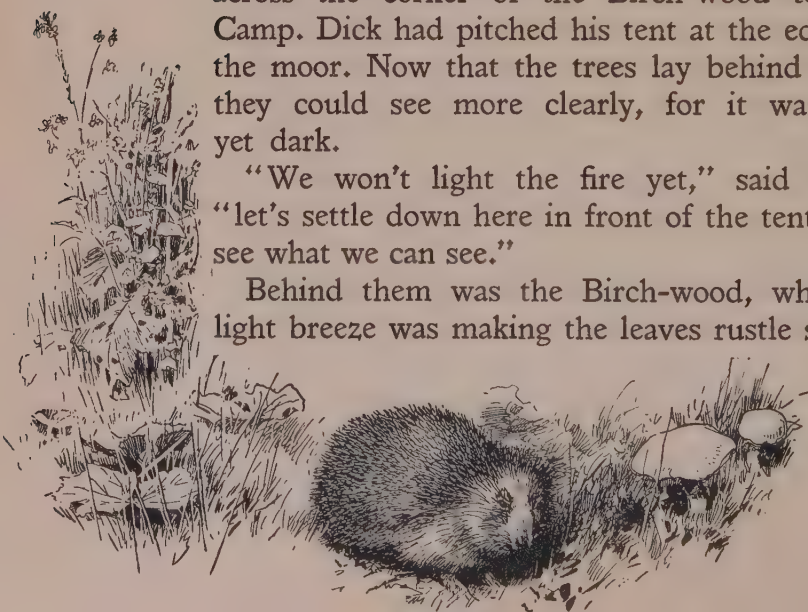
Dick laughed, and said, "Rather too prickly a ball for old Reynard to play with!"

"Oh, look," said Brian, "she has got little ones with her!"

But the Hedgehog and the three white little ones behind her were swallowed up by the sheltering gloom of the close-set young Pines; so they walked on, through the Larches that surround the green basin of the warren, and across the corner of the Birch-wood to the Camp. Dick had pitched his tent at the edge of the moor. Now that the trees lay behind them they could see more clearly, for it was not yet dark.

"We won't light the fire yet," said Dick, "let's settle down here in front of the tent, and see what we can see."

Behind them was the Birch-wood, where a light breeze was making the leaves rustle softly,



and from a high branch a Robin, last of the birds to tire of singing, trilled one more snatch of song before he too settled down for the night. To their right was a rough patch of moorland, bare and stony in parts, but with here and there a hollow filled with bracken, and a knoll or two crowned with ragged gorse. Beyond was the blackness of the big Pine-woods. To the left the ground sloped down to the stream. They could hear the rush of the waterfall, sounding now very loud and near, then dying down to a soft swish that was lost in the sighing of the Birches. Straight before them lay the open moorland, all its vivid tints blotted out in the even grey of dusk, stretching away to the misty hills.

A solitary Deer, that had been drinking at the edge of the stream, bounded lightly across the moor to the Pine-wood. Then another shadow slipped out of the Birch-wood and made for the stream. The Fox had evidently decided not to hunt in the warren. His movements at the stream-side were easily watched, but the cause of them could only be guessed from the Camp. After running up and down for a little, Reynard caught sight of something coming towards the stream. In an instant he was between the water and the approaching animal.



His keen eyes grew brighter, and his mouth gaped expectantly.

"Now I have you, my fine fellow!" said he.

The Water-Vole swerved a little but did not turn back. On he came; he seemed to be running straight at the Fox, and to certain death. But just when Reynard was preparing to pounce, the little dark animal vanished as if the earth had swallowed him up. And so it had, for the Water-Vole had reached one of his own back-doors, and was now running down a tunnel to his snug retreat in the bank. The Fox could hardly believe his eyes, and his bushy tail had rather a dejected droop as he slunk away downstream towards the farm-lands.

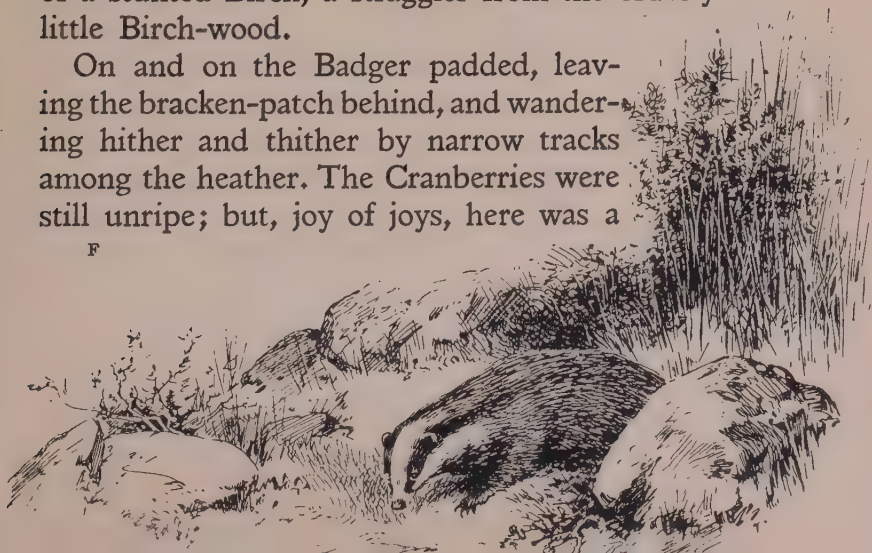
"Let's move a little nearer to that rough ground over there," suggested Dick; "two nights ago I saw a band, or at least a family of Weasels setting off for the moor together. They showed up quite clearly as they crossed one of these bare, stony patches, but when they got in among the heather I lost sight of them at once. One only gets glimpses of animals at night usually."

They crouched among some boulders and waited. The soft greys of twilight had given place to the bold, contrasting black and white

of a clear moonlit night, and, by-and-by, the cramped but patient watchers were rewarded by a sudden view of a strange, striped face, black and white as the night itself. They had not seen the Badger creep out from his "sett" in the stone-covered little knoll in front of them. They just realised that he was there, in the open, on a bare spot that looked like a scar on the moorland. Next moment the long white face, with its two streaks of black running down from the ears, was turned away, and the Badger trotted towards the bracken and entered it by a little archway. He jogged along on his short legs, and the thick bracken hid him from view. Unseen and undisturbed he followed the well-known path, pausing every now and then and probing the ground with his sensitive nose till he unearthed a juicy grub or a beetle; and once stopping to scratch the moss from the trunk of a stunted Birch, a straggler from the orderly little Birch-wood.

On and on the Badger padded, leaving the bracken-patch behind, and wandering hither and thither by narrow tracks among the heather. The Cranberries were still unripe; but, joy of joys, here was a

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Wasps' nest! Caring little for the swarm of angry insects that buzzed about him, and even stung him once or twice in spite of his thick fur coat, he tore the round grey paper nest to bits, and eagerly searched the combs for fat white grubs. When he had eaten them he broke the comb itself to pieces and munched it contentedly till not a scrap was left.

Meanwhile Dick and Brian had returned to the Camp, and were busy lighting a fire within a circle of stones and unpacking the knapsack.

"I wish we had seen more of the Badger," said Brian, as he spread out the supper things.

"We were lucky to see him at all," replied Dick, who was making a rough sketch of the Badger by the light of the fire, "he is a shy creature, just about as difficult to get near as the Otter. I have seen the tracks many a time, but very seldom seen an Otter."

"Does the Badger always hunt at night?"

"Usually; and he is said to eat almost anything except carrion—berries, bulbs, and all sorts of insect grubs and worms, and even young Rabbits and birds. I suppose his home is among these boulders. Badgers make quite complicated 'setts' sometimes, with tunnels leading to rooms far underground. Sometimes

they share an 'earth' with a family of Foxes, which is rather curious, for Foxes are very untidy at home, while the Badger is very clean and particular. I wonder where that Fox we saw has his abode, and what he is up to now? Stealing chickens, quite likely!" said Dick; "and that reminds me, I'm simply starving. Pass me that loaf and the jam-pot, please, Brian."

When supper was over, and the fire had died down to a glowing red mass, the quietness of the night was broken by the weird cry of a Tawny Owl, hidden in some tree.

"Hoooooh!" it called.

After a slight pause it called again, "Hoo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo!"

For half a minute it was silent, then the strange call was repeated. The slurring hoot sounded as though someone were blowing into water through a tube.

"Hoo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo!"

Then the Owl ceased to hoot, and presently a shadow dropped out of the trees and passed low over the moorland. Its big, soft-feathered wings made no sound. Its keen eyes searched the heather, and its strong claws were ready to close on the wandering Mouse. The timid, retiring bird of the daytime was transformed

into the alert, powerful hunter of the night, a shadow swooping through the gloom.

The moon had disappeared behind a bank of clouds, and round the fire-lit circle were curtains of blackness. Brian tried to peer into them. Faint rustlings reached his ears, and once or twice the glow of the dying fire was reflected by a pair of eyes, shining like tiny lamps from the enveloping darkness. Was it Reynard, whose curiosity had got the better of his caution? Was it something smaller, a Rabbit or a Squirrel, roused from sleep? Who was it?

Brian's own eyes grew dim. His eyelids felt very heavy. He did not know when Dick lifted him up, and smiling to himself, put him carefully to bed in the little tent.

Before dawn broke the Badger came back to his home among the boulders, but the Fox family was still abroad. Reynard hunted alone. He had prowled about the farm-lands for hours and robbed the farmer of a young rooster, and now he was roaming the fields in search of unwary Rabbits. His family had come to the meadow to catch Mice. Vixen and her cubs, though they were well-grown now, still kept together.

"Catch them, my pretties!" said the Mother Fox, encouragingly.



The cubs raised themselves up on tiptoe to see better. Their bright eyes were fixed on the grass. Presently a line of shaking grasses showed where a Mouse was running, though the little animal was hidden. That was the time for a Fox to pounce. And pounce they did, one after the other, and their gleeful squeals told when their hunting had been successful.

But Vixen was becoming uneasy. From Moor-end Farm sounds came to her across the quiet fields, the clank of milk-cans, the yapping of a dog, and an occasional shout from a man. The crowing of a Cock had not worried her, but these man and dog sounds were a different matter.

"Come along home now!" she said, and the cubs trotted obediently behind her, as she slipped through a gap in the hedge and crossed the road close to the bridge.

At the stream they paused to drink, then they entered the still dim woods, and made straight for home. Their "earth" was not in Windhover Wood, but in a secluded spot near the edge of the big Pine-wood, to the south of the haunt of the Badgers. Sometimes they kept to the moor, and sometimes to the big woods, but very often they crossed the mixed wood and followed the stream down to Farmer Hale's fields.

When Brian first peeped out of the tent a light mist was rising from the ground, and there was a sharp tang in the air. The mist cleared and the sky brightened, and the morning breeze, soft yet fresh, brought the scents of a hundred sweet-smelling Summer things to the opening of the tent. In the Birch-wood the Robin piped once more, cheerful as ever, but few other birds uttered more than a half-hearted chirrup. Many of them were moulting, and the time of song was over in the woods.

In the green warren Rabbit after Rabbit peeped out from the burrows, sniffed the morning fragrance, and came gladly out to nibble the still dewy grass. Red-flash found time, before he went in search of breakfast, to frisk through the Birches and have a look at the Camp. Although he was now the father of a family of active young Squirrels, that needed a great deal of keeping in order, he was still a very inquisitive, playful little animal himself, and he rather liked to watch Brian from the tree-tops.

Dick and Brian crawled out under the tent-flap.

"Another fine day!" said Dick; "and now for a cold bath, young Brian."

They crossed the heather to the Pool below

the waterfall. The golden-brown water was icy cold. In a moment they were out again, gasping and laughing, and scrambling into their clothes as fast as they could. Back across the moor they ran, stumbling in the heather, and reached the Camp all in a glow.

"Isn't it glorious?" said Brian, as they lit the fire and prepared their breakfast.

They talked again of the great plan, and Brian forgot his sorrow over the coming "good-byes" in his joy in the thought of—Next Time. He stared dreamily across the moor, scarcely seeing the Heron that flapped slowly past from the Pine-woods, seeing instead a little tent pitched near another rushing stream.

"Sometime," he murmured; then he chuckled. "I wonder what the wood-animals think of that smell?" he added, as he prodded the frizzling bacon with a fork.



## CHAPTER VII

### THE MONSTER ON THE MOOR

AUGUST was a month of gold. Day after day, the sun shone down on the golden faces of the Corn-Marigolds peeping through the yellowing corn. On the river-bank big Ragworts flaunted tousled yellow heads; while Hawkweeds and many another golden flower brightened the dusty hedgerows.

Only the briefest of showers broke the spell of fine weather, occasional sprinklings of rain that put a stop to the dust-clouds for a short time, but made little difference to the parched surface of the ground. The hedges by the roadside were smothered in dust,—Bramble, Honey-suckle and Wild Rose alike were coated with grey, and below them the paper-like Harebells rustled among the dry grasses.

In the meadows there was a constant coming and going of hard-working Bees, seeking the honey and pollen from the flowers, flying to and fro with an air of purpose very different from the flutterings of a Tortoiseshell Butterfly



RAGWORT

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that was playing round the fragrant, creamy heads of the Meadowsweet by the stream-side. The stream itself had a drowsy sound. It had dwindled to half the size it was when Brian listened to its chatter from the Birch-wood Camp. Some shallow pools had dried up altogether, but many of the little creatures that usually swam about in them had the power of "lying low" in the mud during the time of drought. When the rain filled the pools once more, they would revive and become active again.

In the early morning, and when the sun was low in the west, the wood-animals were busy, but during the day most of them were content to be lazy. Puff, the Rabbit, spent long hours basking on a favourite couch of grass, hidden by the long herbage. Many of his friends had gone too far afield in search of fresher grass and pure water, and had been pounced upon by wily Reynard, who hunted boldly long after dawn. But still the warren swarmed with Rabbits, old and young. Puff's own mother now had other little bunnies very much smaller than himself.

Puff raised his twitching nose slightly, and quivered for a moment. Then he settled down again comfortably, with half-closed eyes.



TORTOISESHELL



"Only that boy!" he thought, and, knowing that human beings seldom knew he was there if he kept quite still, he decided that it was quite unnecessary to leave his quiet corner.

Brian and his father passed within a yard of him, without suspecting it. They were admiring the tall Foxgloves that grew on the bank above the stream. Brian poked his finger into a red bell.

"Don't do that, Brian," warned his father, "there might be a Bee inside. Look at that one!"

As he spoke a Bee backed out of one of the "glove-fingers." Its body was covered with fine golden dust. It groomed itself with its legs, and flew off to another spike of Foxglove.

"That dust is the pollen," explained Mr. West, "and the Bee uses it as well as the honey from the flower. It packs it into a little 'basket' on its hind leg, and takes it home to the hive to make 'bee-bread'; but a good deal of it remains on the hairs of the body, and is rubbed off on the next flower the Bee visits. The little seeds inside the flower do not give rise to seedlings unless the golden dust has reached them, so the Bees are very useful to the flowers when they carry the pollen from one to another. They do the good work quite unconsciously,

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of course, but the sweet honey is the lure and the reward."

When they had walked a little farther Brian found a beautiful Spider's web spread out on the heather. It had a curiously red colour.

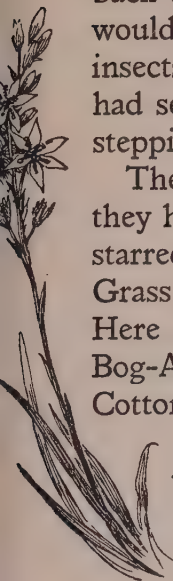
"More pollen!" said Mr. West; "that reddish dust sticking to the threads of the web is Fir-pollen. It is scattered by the wind, and a great deal of it falls where it is of no use, but some of it is sure to be blown from plant to plant. Look at that Tiger Beetle!"



TIGER BEETLE

Brian stooped down, and saw a brilliant green Beetle hurrying away through the heather stems. A little Ladybird, redder than the ripening Cranberries, walked across his hand as he held back the bunches of deep rose Bell-heather. He would have liked to linger and look for other insects, but his father reminded him that they had set out to visit the marsh, so they went on, stepping out briskly.

The marshy patch on the moor, where earlier they had seen the swarms of Tadpoles, was now starred with the dainty white flowers of the Grass of Parnassus on their slender stems. Here and there were the yellow spikes of the Bog-Asphodel; and in the swampiest part the Cotton-Grass was showing tufts of white fluff.



BOG  
ASPHODEL



GRASS OF  
PARNASSUS

A brown Grass-Snake, that had been sunning itself on a cushion of moss, glided quietly away and was lost among the tussocks.

"He is a Frog-eater," said Mr. West, "he wouldn't hurt you, for he is not a poisonous Snake like the Adder; but he evidently does not mean to wait and let us have a look at him."

"This is the Butterwort you were talking about, isn't it, Daddy?" said Brian, pointing to a star of pale green, fleshy leaves, and a purply-blue flower on a long thin stalk.

"Yes, that is one of the plants which catch flies. The leaves are sticky and little insects get caught on them; then the edges of the leaves curl over, and more sticky fluid is poured on the struggling insect, till it is drowned and finally digested by the plant. It is curious to think that the same plant attracts other insects to its flower with its honey and lets them carry away its pollen, just like the Bee we saw on the Foxgloves, while its leaves are trapping insects for food!"

A little farther on they found another Insect-eating plant, the Sundew, with its rosette of red leaves. The little leaves were covered with hairs, many of which were tipped with a droplet of fluid which shone in the sunlight.

"It is not dew," said Mr. West, "but the sticky digestive juice again."

They watched till they saw a small Fly alight on one of the leaves. At once the little red hairs began to curl in and help the sticky fluid to keep the insect a prisoner.

"The Sundew can live like other plants on what it gets from the soil and the air," Mr. West said, "but it thrives much better if it has insects to feed upon."

A little later, when they had wandered back to the stream, Brian noticed that his father was gazing at the moor on the south side of the stream, and when he looked in that direction he saw a grey cloud on the slope that rose to the east of the Pine-woods.

"Why, it's smoke!" he exclaimed; "are they burning heather again?"

Brian had seen patches of heather burnt earlier in the Summer, and had noticed how the sheep seemed to like the tender young grass that soon sprouted on the bare stretches. But Mr. West shook his head.

"I don't think so," he answered gravely, "I am afraid the dry heather has caught fire on its own account. It will be terrible if it spreads. I don't see anyone up there. I must go and give

the alarm. Be careful, Brian, and don't go too near."

When his father had hurried away, Brian crossed the stream and walked over the moor towards the big woods. He watched the smoke with dismay as it spread across the hillside. He thought of the wood-animals, and what their fate would be if that dreadful fiery monster reached the woods and began devouring the dry bushes and trees. Nothing would be able to stop it. Windhover Wood seemed doomed. Brian shivered, and gazed wide-eyed at the grey cloud.

Minute by minute the smoke-cloud was growing, and creeping nearer and nearer to the dark mass of the great Pine-wood. Every now and then the grey was shot with red and gold, great tongues of flame leaped up as big clumps of gorse caught fire. The air was full of the smell of burning wood. Dozens of birds had already risen from the heather and flown away, uttering cries of alarm. A startled Hare raced down the slope, with his long ears pressed back and his brown eyes staring wildly.

A great Stag, that had been lying peacefully chewing the cud and basking in the sunlight, on a grassy spot among the heather, rose to his feet and tossed back his head. It was a noble



head, bearing a "royal" pair of antlers, for they had twelve points to their branches. The "velvet" had nearly all peeled off the antlers, for August was at its height, and the Stag was looking his best. His coat was in good condition, and the antlers that had been growing since April were the envy of every young Stag in the district, who could only boast of two or perhaps four points.

With quivering nostrils the Stag sniffed the smoke-laden air. A crackling sound reached his ears, and presently a wave of heat, that was not the kindly warmth of the sun, stole up to him and made his skin tingle. He did not wait for more. He made for the higher ground, and joined a swiftly running band of his fellows on the hill-top. Brian saw them as they crossed the sky-line. Then quite close to him at the fringe of the wood a frightened Hind and her Fawn stumbled noisily through the underbrush, and disappeared among the tree-trunks.

The animals in the wood were restless and disturbed. They could not understand the strange smells that stung their sensitive nostrils. Vixen and the cubs left their earth and roamed uneasily to and fro among the bushes. Among the branches there was an unusual chattering

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of birds. Many of them flew a little way out of the wood and then returned, as though undecided whether to go or stay.

"If the fire reaches this wood," said Brian to himself, "Windhover Wood will be burnt too."

He sat on a heather-covered mound, and thought about the Squirrels and the Rabbits and the Hedgehogs and all the others who might be driven from their homes, or burnt to death if they did not leave them soon enough. He felt very miserable. Then he saw a number of men hurrying towards the fire from different directions. From the stream-side came his father and the men from Moor-end Farm, while a band of men from the village were tramping through the wood.

With a sigh of relief Brian got up and went nearer to see them at work. Mr. West called to him to keep away from the scorching heat of the fire, so he could only look on, while the men attacked the flames with tree-branches. The wind was blowing the fire towards the wood, and the heat was so great that the men could not beat out the flames on that side.

"Oh, they're lighting more fires, Daddy!" cried Brian, suddenly.

"It's the only thing to do," said Mr. West,

without stopping work, "we are going to burn a strip right across here. We can control it quite easily, putting out our little fires as soon as we have burnt enough. When the big fire reaches our burnt strip it will find nothing more to burn."

It happened as Mr. West said. Brian watched with fascinated eyes while the "monster" ate up the heather till it reached the bare strip. Sure enough its progress was checked. It could not jump the already burnt part and continue on its devouring way down the slope. The woods were saved.

"Hurrah!" cried Brian, as the flames gradually died down.

The work was far from being finished. The whole of the burnt area was surrounded by men ready to beat out the flames whenever a fresh outbreak occurred. Sparks were blown from the smouldering parts and every now and then one set fire to a new piece of heather. But the men quickly attacked them with their branches.

Brian roamed about the slope looking for animals which had been chased from their usual haunts by the oncoming fire. He had a glimpse of an Adder about a foot and a half long. It was olive-grey in colour, with a dark

zigzag band down the middle of its back. It was moving swiftly through the heather, seeking some new hiding-place, or some quiet spot where it might bask in the sun again. A little farther on he surprised a family of Slow-worms, limbless Lizards that at first glance look very like Snakes. But Brian had seen one before, and he noticed again the blinking of the eyelids, quite unlike the stony stare of the Adder. These were young Slow-worms, not more than six inches long, and darker than the large one he had seen one day with his father in the wood. Their backs were silvery, but with dark stripes, while underneath they were quite black. They had bright amber-coloured eyes, and keen eyes they were too (though Slow-worms are sometimes called "Blindworms"), for as soon as Brian's shadow fell on them they wriggled uneasily and began to move away.

Brian sat down to rest among the heather, and presently he noticed a large Spider scurrying along as fast as she could with a bundle tucked under her body. It was a little silk bag, and was evidently very precious, for when he tried very gently to take it from her she resented it very much, and held it still more firmly. And no wonder, for the bag was a silken cradle, the

cocoon in which the Mother Spider was carrying her family of tiny Spiders. Brian had seen others like it attached to the heather twigs. He gave up teasing the Spider and lay quite still, staring at the ground.

There was a little movement quite near him, and a small greenish-brown Lizard appeared suddenly on a flat slab of stone. He looked curiously stumpy, for he had at some time lost his tail. Probably he had jerked it off, as Lizards do in time of danger, during some encounter with an enemy. Perhaps a Kestrel had swooped down upon him from the sky, and had only secured a worthless little tail, while he had darted under a sheltering stone, tailless but safe. Like most Reptiles he was shy and nervous, and, though Brian thought he had not so much as moved an eyelash, the Lizard took fright almost at once and was gone from the stone in a flash, and the thick heather hid him from view.

Brian scrambled to his feet at last and brushed the heather off his clothes with his hands. He went slowly down the slope of the moor till he came to the rough part that he called the Badger's ground. Now that the dreadful crackling of the fire had died down, everything seemed quiet



and drowsy again. The birds had ceased their frightened twitterings, and there was little movement on the moor. Overhead the sky was still serenely blue, though a brooding grey cloud had settled above the hills. The wind had fallen; the air was still and close. Even the leaves of the Birch-wood, ready to tremble before the slightest breeze, were almost motionless.

Windhover Wood, with its many shades of green, looked very peaceful and lovely. Brian pictured the heat-drowsy animals curled up in its shade, and felt very thankful that the fiery monster on the moor had not reached their home or struck terror into their little hearts. He smiled and waved his hand as he climbed over the Badger's boulders. His mother was waiting for him at the old Camping-spot.

"Tea, Brian!" she said, as he drew near.

"Good!" said Brian, throwing himself down on the moss beside her.

"Tea in a Thermos-flask," Mrs. West added; "I would not light a fire—there has been enough of that. Wasn't it dreadful? But not nearly so bad as it might have been."

"If it had reached the woods——" Brian said.

"We won't talk about it, Brian; let's have tea. I expect Daddy will come along soon."

## THE MONSTER ON THE MOOR 101

Brian discovered that he was extremely hungry, and he unpacked the basket of sandwiches and buns with much joy. When everything was ready Mr. West joined them. He had been down at the stream washing his hands and face, for he had been working hard at the fire, and the smoke had made him very dirty.

"My eyes are smarting," he said, "and I am very thirsty; no buns, Brian, thank you—tea, tea!"

They had a jolly little picnic, and when it was over Brian asked if he might go up to the burnt part again.

"Very well," said Mr. West, "if you are not tired. I am going to carry Mother's basket home. Don't be long."

As Brian walked across the moor he began to realise that he was tired after all. The deep heather made tramping rather difficult. He looked up and saw that the grey clouds were spreading, blotting out the blue. Ahead he could see the great black patch on the slope. A few men were still walking up and down beside it. Wisps of smoke still hovered over it, and a faint smell of charred wood blew across the moor, borne by a cold little breeze that had sprung up. The sky grew darker. A low rumble broke the stillness.

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Brian felt a drop of rain, very big and cold, against his upturned cheek. Another came, and another, and the moor seemed to hide all its vividness under a cloak of grey. Brian turned and made for home.



HARE



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LITTLE FIELD-FOLK

**I**T was a lovely Saturday morning in early Autumn. Long-tail did not know that it was Saturday, for he is a little Wood-Mouse, and all days are alike to him; but he knew that the air was full of sweet scents, and that life was a feast of fruits and seeds. The night was not long enough for him, he was still active and busy long after dawn.

Just about the time when Brian was stretching out lazy arms as the sun peeped in between his bedroom curtains, Long-tail was sitting up in an old Blackbird's nest in the hedge near the bridge. Brian was thinking, "Saturday — no lessons!" Long-tail was thinking, "These seeds are the nicest things I've tasted for a long time."

The Wood-Mouse was picking a Rose-hip to

pieces. He did not eat the pretty red part; he took out the seeds, split them with his sharp little teeth, and swallowed the delicious kernel. He was too busy to notice a red-brown form creeping along in the shadow of the hedge. He picked up another Rose-hip in his dainty paws and turned it round and round, and sniffed at it with his pointed nose. Below him the red-brown animal paused and sniffed too.

"Mouse!" said Fire-eyes to himself.

He entered the hedge noiselessly and climbed up a stout branch. When he was not very far from Long-tail he stopped and tested the branches. They were thin and dry and thorny. They cracked. Long-tail looked up from his meal and saw those fierce red eyes glaring at him. He shivered, and dropped his Rose-hip, but, luckily for him, he stayed where he was. Fire-eyes looked with distaste at the slender, thorny twigs on which the bird's nest was poised. He knew that they would never stand the weight of his body, so he turned back, and slipped quietly down to the road again.

"Only a stupid little Mouse anyway," the Weasel said to himself, as he crossed the road and made for the wood.

Long-tail washed his face with his paws, and



promptly forgot his enemy. There were still plenty of Rose-seeds to eat, and that was all that mattered. A Kestrel passed overhead, but did not see him through the leaves, and went on to the fields, to swoop down presently on a short-tailed Meadow-Vole that was breakfasting on dew-tipped grasses.

Brian jumped out of bed and ran to the open window. The fresh morning air was very inviting. Already a reaping-machine in the distance was making a cheerful whirring sound. Brian whistled blithely as he dressed.

"Time for a run before breakfast," he said to himself, as he pulled on his gymnastic shoes.

He ran down the knoll by the main path, but when he reached the road he soon slowed down to a walk. He watched a gay Chaffinch playing about the hedge. In and out it went, flashing its white feathers in the sunlight, cocking its pretty blue head on one side, and then preening its ruddy breast, but never keeping still for more than a second or two. The hedge looked more tangled than ever. The Honeysuckle leaves were withered and yellow; the Rose-hips and the Haws showed bright red among the fading leafage; and over them all the Brambles threw



long trails with purple berries half-hidden by the leaves.

Long-tail had left the Blackbird's nest, and when Brian caught sight of him he was sitting up at the very edge of the road. For a wonder Brian saw Long-tail before the Wood-Mouse noticed him, so he was able to watch the unsuspecting little animal for a few minutes. His sleek, slim body was of a dark wood-brown colour above, but as he sat up he displayed his soft white waistcoat. He was parting the fur very carefully with his paws, showing the grey colour below the white, and licking his waistcoat with his tiny tongue. Almost immediately, however, he became aware of Brian. He looked at him with his big dark eyes, and then took a bound into the grass. Another bound gave Brian a glimpse of the long tail—as long as the Mouse's head and body—dark above, and white underneath, and just a glimpse of the white hind feet; then he saw him no more.

Long-tail crept through the hedge, and sat up and washed his face for the hundredth time that morning. The danger was over now, so instead of bounding along, he ran on all-fours into the field. He darted from side to side, sniffing, licking, nibbling. Here was a fallen

Bramble from the hedge, there a plump grass-seed; such a lot of things for a busy Wood-Mouse to attend to before he went back to have a nap in his snug underground home!

Brian had to hurry back to breakfast. He ran along the stream-side path to the wicket-gate, and climbed the knoll by the steep path. As soon as breakfast was over he came out again. The harvest was in full swing, so he was going to spend his Saturday in the fields. He ran down the main path and crossed the road. Opposite the Windhover gate there is another gate, and from it a narrow path leads across the fields to Moor-end Farm. Along this path Brian sauntered till he came to the stile, and there he stopped to look about him.

From his perch on top of the stile Brian could see across many fields. They made a gay patch-work. Some were grass-green and flower-starred; some were full of blue-green crops in straight rows; others showed golden stretches of waving corn; while in one or two the corn was already cut, and only the stubble was left. Below him in the meadow the Thistledown was drifting lightly above the flower-heads, and the sun was gleaming on the fine silken threads of gossamer that had fallen across the grasses. The gossamer

caught Brian's eye; some of it was still floating in the air, and when he looked closer he found that dozens of tiny Spiders were launching themselves on a voyage of adventure from the top of the fence beside the stile.

The little Spiders stood on tiptoe facing the light breeze that blew across the fields, and paid out fine threads of silk from the spinnerets at the hind end of their bodies, to make a parachute. When the dainty parachutes floated out on the breeze the Spiders let go their hold on the fence-top, and drifted away across the meadow. They went where the playful wind took them. Some dropped to earth quite soon, and their parachutes lay quivering and sparkling on the grass. Others kept spinning more and more silk to add to their balloons, and theirs was a longer journey; they were borne far across the fields to discover new worlds.

But the sound of the reaping-machine and the rumble of the heavily-loaded carts made Brian leave the Spiders very soon. He jumped down from the stile and ran to the farm.

"Will you give me a lift?" he called to a man who was leaving the yard with a clattering, empty cart.

The man pulled up the horse, and stretched his hand out to help Brian to climb up.

"You'll have to work if you're coming with me," he said.

"Rather!" said Brian, cheerfully.

Brian did not really do very much work, but he spent a happy forenoon, and had many jolly rides on the carts. When he went home for dinner, his mother said his face was browner than ever; "quite like Dick's," she added.

In the afternoon Brian went out to meet Elsie and Roger Brown, who were going to have a picnic tea with him in the meadow beside the stream. He found Roger waiting for him on the bridge.

"Elsie is down there," said Roger, "she says she is hot."

He pointed down at the stream, where his small sister was sitting on the bank dangling her feet in the cool water.

"Is it tea-time, Brian?" Elsie called.

"You are a greedy little thing!" laughed Brian; and he and Roger lifted the knapsack carefully over the low end of the bridge parapet and slid down into the meadow.

None of the children could resist the knapsack



for very long, so they pulled out the Thermos-flask and the bottle of milk, and opened the white paper packets to see what Mrs. West had given them in the way of buns and sandwiches. They discovered that they had no cups, so they had to take it in turn to drink out of the little cup-top of the flask, and somehow that made the picnic all the jollier.

"I wonder if the field-folk will come and eat up the crumbs," said Brian, stretching himself out lazily on the dry grass.

"Roger found a dead Mole on the road," said Elsie.

"Yes," Roger added, "killed by a Fox or something."

"Reynard won't eat Moles," Brian said. "I wonder if it had been in the woods. The fields were so dry and hard last month, I expect some of the Moles would go and look for Worms under the leaves in the wood, where it wouldn't be so dry. I saw a little fellow washing himself this morning, a Long-tailed Wood-Mouse."

"I know," said Roger, eagerly, "they are the ones that leave the broken-up Rose-hips in old nests, aren't they? Was he pretty?"

"Oh, very slim and neat and silky, with a

white waistcoat and ever such a long tail, longer ears than a House-Mouse, and big, bright black eyes. Dick told me he once put his finger into a nest and a Mother Wood-Mouse jumped out and bounded away with three baby ones clinging tightly to her with their teeth."

The whirr of the reaping-machine still came to them across the fields. Roger listened to it for a moment and then said, "I'm afraid that thing will be turning a lot of animals out of their homes."

Brian nodded.

"I expect most of them will escape in time though," he said, "and the Mice will go back later on to pick up fallen Corn among the stubble. But they will have to be careful or the Owl will snap them up, for there won't be anything to hide them in the short stubble. Wouldn't I just love to see a Harvest-Mouse! In some places you find their round nests swung from the Corn-stalks."

"Oh, aren't they too heavy?" Elsie asked, in surprise.

"Heavy? No! The nest is about the size of an orange, but it is made of plaited grasses. Why, one Harvest-Mouse would not weigh down a halfpenny! They are the tiniest creatures

—even a nest with seven or eight babies inside isn't too heavy to hang on the Cornstalks. It must be a safe little cradle too."

They lay quite still for a little and Elsie had a glimpse of a rough, furry little Meadow-Vole, with a short scrap of a tail, half-hidden by the long grass. She called out to the boys, and of course it scampered away at once.

Brian, lying on his back, staring up at the clear, pale blue sky, saw a band of birds flying high overhead, like a swiftly moving cloud. He pointed them out with a lazy wave of his hand, and Roger watched them too till they were out of sight.

"What are they, Brian?" he asked.

"I've no idea. Aren't they flying high? I suppose they are off to the south for the Winter, but they will come back to nest here next Spring. I've noticed a good many birds collecting in bands lately, getting ready for their Autumn flitting."

"It seems like Summer still——"

"It is frosty in the mornings sometimes already, and there are not so many insects about; besides, birds seem to keep to their regular times of coming and going. They don't all leave us, and we have Winter visitors too,

like the Fieldfare, which we don't see at all in Summer."

"What are Fieldfares like?" Roger asked.

"They are grey-and-brown birds, with speckled breasts, like Song-Thrushes. They come in flocks from colder places, and spend the Winter here, feeding in the fields."

"The Cuckoos and Swallows and Swifts are all away now, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are just Summer visitors. A great many of the birds we see in Winter are visitors too, but we don't notice them coming and going because we have other birds of the same kind here in Summer," said Brian, and added, as he sat up and stretched his arms, "What shall we do now?"

"Let's go and look for a Mole," said Roger, getting up and shaking himself.

Brian laughed, and answered, "All right, but I expect we'll find plenty of Mole-hills and no Moles!"

He was right, for though they searched the meadow and broke down many of the heaps of earth the Moles had thrown up in their tunnelling, they had not so much as a glimpse of Velvet-coat himself. Brian passed quite close to his "fortress" where he was having a rest

before returning to his work of burrowing and Worm-hunting. The "fortress" was a large mound of soil, with many galleries running through it, and a dry, well-drained central room where the Mole was taking his nap. There was a "bolt-hole" leading from it straight down into the ground, and if Brian had started to break into the "fortress," Velvet-coat would have escaped down his way of retreat with all possible speed.

"The dead Mole I found had very big paws," said Roger.

"Yes, regular shovels!" Brian said; "he is a splendid digger, and is tremendously strong for his size. I like his soft dark fur, you can rub it either way, because the short hairs stand straight out instead of lying in a special direction."

The children soon tired of the hunt, and returned to the side of the stream. Velvet-coat stirred in his nest, and thought of Worms. He felt horribly hungry. It was two hours since his last meal, and that is a long time for Velvet-coat, who eats and eats and still is always ready to eat again. He hurried along one of his tunnels, feeling the way with his stubby nose. He was on the alert all the time. Although no ears showed on his smooth head, he had very keen



hearing. His tiny pinhead-like eyes were of no use to him, he did not need them in his underground haunts. A few movements of his broad hands and strong wrists broke down the soil and a large Earthworm became his victim. When he had satisfied his appetite he collected still more Worms, and bit them with his sharp teeth, and left them in a heap ready for some future meal.

The Summer had been a dry one, so the Mole had to make tunnels deep into the ground. In wet weather, when the Worms were near the surface, his runs were quite shallow. The soil in the meadow was rather light and easily worked, so Velvet-coat was able to burrow quickly, using his long, sensitive snout to probe the ground, and his broad paws as spades. The soil that he threw up at the ends of his runs made the little brown mounds dotted all over the green meadow. But, as Brian had long ago found out, Velvet-coat never seemed to be anywhere near these brown Mole-hills.

"I would like to see a Mole alive," Brian was saying to Roger, "I've often seen dead ones; the men at the Farm kill them."

"They kill any animals they see," said Roger, flicking a head of Ragwort to make the down-tipped seeds fly off.

"Oh no, they don't," Brian replied, "but they have to keep down the ones that spoil the fields and crops. After all, most animals have enemies—but I don't believe they worry. If a Wood-Mouse gets a fright, he just runs away a bit, and washes his face, and forgets all about it!"

"You've seen lots of animals *we* never see, Brian," said Elsie, enviously.

"I haven't seen an Otter yet though. Perhaps I shall next time I go camping with Dick."

As they talked the daylight faded, and the sky was tinged with red in the west. Three long-necked Ducks flew quickly past. They looked black against the rosy clouds.

"It is time we went home," said Roger, and he took Elsie's hand and pulled her up the bank.

They climbed up beside the bridge and over the parapet on to the road. Brian went a little way with them. They stopped to look at a "Woolly Bear" Caterpillar that was crawling across the road. It was moving along at a great rate, humping its hairy brown body. A little farther on they found a little dead animal, with a long pointed face. It was a Shrew. Brian turned it over, but there was no mark of tooth

or claw on its soft little body, nothing to show why it had died there in the roadway.

"I say, we'll be awfully late if we keep on finding things," said Roger, at last.

"All right, I'll go back now," said Brian; "good-bye!"

He ran back to the bridge, turning once to wave to Roger and Elsie before they disappeared round the bend of the road, and then he went along the path beside the stream. He felt very much tempted to cross the stepping-stones and visit Windhover Wood, but he had been out all day and was getting tired.

"Mother will be looking out for me," he murmured, and, hitching up his knapsack straps on his shoulders, he began to climb the little steep path from the wicket-gate. He paused once or twice, not because he was out of breath, but to gaze across the fields at the river. The greens and golds of the fields had become soft and blurred, but the river was a glittering serpent, trapping the sunset colours in its shining coils.



A  
"ROYAL"  
STAG

## CHAPTER IX

### AN AUTUMN MORNING

**A**CROSS the moor a deep roar sounded a challenge. The "royal" Stag was standing on the slope, not far from the place where the fire had left a bare patch amidst the wide stretches of purple heather. His great antlers with twelve points were pressed back against his shoulders, and his swollen, shaggy neck was raised high as he repeated his strange bellow. His breath made a cloud of steam in the frosty morning air. Behind him a little group of Hinds stood close together, watching him with wide-open brown eyes.

"Who dares? Who dares?" he roared, and presently a glint came to his bloodshot eyes as an answering roar filled the air.

Over the heather came another Stag, as fierce-looking and shaggy as the "royal," but with fewer points to his antlers.

"I dare!" said his hoarse voice.

The two Stags stood and looked at each other for a moment. They were both mud-caked and

ragged, their glossy coats of a month ago were gone, and their faces were furrowed and their eyes wild.

They lowered their heads and charged. Antlers met with a clash and rattle, and interlocked. Gripping each other thus with their antlers, they wrestled and pushed, to and fro and round and round. Then they broke away from each other and lunged with their "brow-tines," the up-turned lowest branches of their antlers, and sometimes rose high on their hind legs and tried to give each other sharp blows with their fore feet. It was like boxing.

The Hinds watched the rivals with excited eyes, but did not move. Soon the combat was over, for the older Stag suddenly caught the intruder by surprise and dealt him a severe blow in the flank. The thrust was too much for the younger Stag; he turned and limped away, with blood dripping down his matted coat. The "royal" uttered a triumphant roar and a repeated challenge. He was ready to meet any other bold Stags who thought they would like to steal his gentle Hinds. No reply came, so he drove his little herd farther up the slope, and roared and roared again, till the glen seemed full of the terrible sound.



Brian, who was out very early, heard the roaring from beside the Pool below the waterfall, and was startled when he saw a Stag crossing the heather towards the bracken-patch. His father had warned him that Stags are dangerous during the mating season, but he had not expected to see one so low down the glen. He felt glad that they were separated by the stream and a long stretch of heather. But the poor defeated Stag had no thought of fighting with man or beast; he only wanted to be quiet. He stumbled into the shelter of the tall bracken and lay down, and the tawny leaves hid him from view. When the throbbing of his wound grew less he became drowsy. All day long he rested there in the bracken-patch near the Badger's boulders, and at nightfall he slipped down to the Pool and drank deeply, and felt refreshed.

Brian gazed across the moor before he turned back. The heather was still in its full glory, though the bracken had withered to a golden-brown. The sun was like a ball of fire surrounded by a soft rosy haze. Drifting wisps of mist passed like shadows across it. When Brian turned and looked at Windhover he saw how every window blazed back fire at the

morning sun. He began to walk slowly back by the stream-side path.

Apart from the Red Deer, and some birds of passage, there was little movement on the moor. The Snakes and the Lizards had disappeared, the first frosts had driven them to hiding-holes in which they would pass the long Winter. The Frogs were lying in comfortable holes in the banks near the marsh pools, where they would remain, taking no food, and breathing only through their skins, till Spring came to wake them up to active life again.

Just before he reached the Bramble-patch Brian paused to look at the Fairy Ring. He had seen it often before, but it always fascinated him. It lay in the middle of a grassy patch surrounded by heather and gorse-bushes, and it was an almost perfect circle of soft, rich green, of a darker colour than the grass round about it. It looked indeed a lovely ball-room for the "little people" to dance on!

Brian knew that the ring was caused by some kind of Toadstool. To start with there had been just a single Toadstool, which spread its root-like threads all around it, till it exhausted the soil in the centre of the ring, so that new Toadstools could only spring up from the spores

scattered outside the circle. Thus the ring had grown bigger and bigger, and though the ground it encircled was no longer fit for the Toadstools, it was richer than ever in food for the grasses, which grew up very soft and green.

As he walked through the Bramble-patch Brian startled a beautiful Cock Pheasant, that had been picking up some of the ripe berries that still lay about under the bushes. He rose with a sharp cry and flew over the stream to the wood, with his long tail streaming out behind him, and his bright feathers gleaming in the sunshine. Brian followed him to the Birch-wood, crossing the stream by the stepping-stones, but he did not see him again.

"What a beauty!" exclaimed Brian, as he caught sight of a huge Toadstool under a Birch-tree. It was a brilliant scarlet Fly-Agaric.

"I think I'll go and look for the Squirrels," he said to himself, and turned and walked quietly through the Larches beside the warren and entered Windhover Wood.

With the coming of Autumn, Red-flash had been seized with a curious restlessness. For several days he deserted his family and played about by himself at the fringe of the wood, trying to make up his mind to wander farther



FLY  
AGARIC

afield. He wanted to explore the world. At last he decided to cross the stream. He leaped lightly from stone to stone, and arrived at the opposite bank without wetting his fur. Not that he was afraid of the water, for Squirrels can swim quite well if it is necessary, but it was rather good fun to jump from one stone to another with the stream gurgling and chuckling all around.

He reached the Bramble-patch, and, as the berries were then at their best, he had a great feast. For a time he thought of exploring still farther, but at last he decided, like a wise little Squirrel, to return to his pretty mate, Russet, and to the Winter home in the hole in the big Beech-tree. The drey on the Spruce-top had been very comfortable during the warm Summer, but now that the nights were colder and strong winds often raced through the woods, the Squirrels were glad to retreat to their Winter quarters.

Next day his restlessness was quite forgotten, for rain had fallen during the night and in the morning there was a great crop of Mushrooms and Toadstools among the grass. Red-flash and Russet and their little ones were out early, and, when they had eaten as many Toadstools as they wanted for breakfast, they set to work to

make a store of the delicious food to eat later on. They carried the Toadstools up a tree and poked them into crevices near the fork, where they would be kept dry, and so would not rot.

This morning, while Brian was coming quietly through the wood, Red-flash was sitting erect on a fallen log, nibbling the scales of a Pine-cone, which he held in his paws, while a little bit away Russet was making her toilet on a low branch. She examined her fur very carefully, and licked each paw in turn and washed her little pointed face with them. Both she and her mate were in splendid condition. Red-flash was an unusually big and strong Squirrel. He had nearly finished changing his coat for the Winter, and though it was not so bright as his red-brown Summer one, it was very thick and soft. His back was dark brown, and his sides rather grey-brown, while the pure white of his waistcoat was rapidly changing to a soft grey. His Autumn brush was thick and glossy, and on his ears the tufts were growing rapidly.

"Let's go and gather some more nuts!" said Red-flash, dropping the remains of the Pine-cone, and leaping on to the tree beside Russet.

They bounded gaily from branch to branch, and even their light weight was enough to cause



a small shower of leaves and nuts. The leaves were still thick on the trees, but most of them had their green splashed with yellow and red, and many of them were quietly drifting down to the ground, adding slowly but steadily to the rustling carpet of withered leaves that already nearly hid the bright green mosses.

Brian sat down in a sheltered corner in the part of the wood that he knew to be the Squirrels' favourite haunt. Through the trees he could see the sun, which, now that it had struggled free of the mists, was clear-cut and vivid orange.

"It is like a big Chinese lantern," thought Brian.

Red-flash and Russet did not notice him when they came along, or if they did they showed no sign of fear, and he watched them for a long time as they scampered to and fro. They were very busy. The Oak-trees were laden with acorns, and the mast was thick on the Beeches. Red-flash and Russet stripped them off as fast as they could. They did not eat many, for they had already breakfasted, but every now and then they nibbled a specially plump one. Many of them they scattered heedlessly around, stripping them off for the sheer fun of doing it!

Suddenly Red-flash left the Beech-tree and

ran along the ground to a thicket of Hazel-bushes and began stripping off the nuts. They looked very tempting. He grasped one firmly in his paws and set his sharp teeth in its shell. With a quick jerk of his head he ripped a piece out of the shell, and then he was able to get at the sweet kernel. It tasted very good. He picked another and ran away with it to the foot of a tree. Here he scratched busily for a few minutes till he had made a little cave among the roots; then he popped in his nut.

Back he went to the bushes for another nut which he put in the hiding-place at the foot of the tree. When he had hidden three or four he closed up the hole, and scraped some dead leaves over the spot. Then away he went again. Russet joined him at the Hazel-bushes; and she too began to bury nuts, sometimes two or three together, sometimes a single one in a hole all by itself. Once she was just going to pick a fine big nut when Red-flash snatched it from under her very nose. She turned on him with an angry little snarl.

"Give me that nut, you rude Squirrel!" she scolded.

But Red-flash ran away with it in his mouth. She was after him in an instant; up tree and

down tree she chased him, chattering and scolding all the time. She made a surprisingly loud noise, and Brian chuckled as the pair of them racketed through the branches just over his head, with their claws rattling on the dry bark.

Finally Red-flash dropped the nut so that he could answer back, but the chase went on all the same. Probably by this time they had both forgotten that it was a chase, and were simply enjoying one of their games. In any case it ended as suddenly as it had begun, and a few minutes later they were picking nuts side by side again quite peacefully.

"I wonder if they have any idea that Winter is coming," thought Brian, "or if it is just a game to them to bury nuts. I expect it is just because there are such lots of them, far more than they can eat just now, that they make stores for the future. I suppose if times are hard they will come back for them, just like the Weasel that Mother told me about, that gathers dead Rats into heaps."

Only a few yards away another little animal was busily at work among the acorns below an old Oak-tree. The nut-harvest had tempted Long-tail, the Wood-Mouse, from his haunt in the hedgerow into the heart of Windhover Wood.

He had found a large acorn which he was now holding in his dainty paws, while he neatly chiselled a round hole in the shell with his teeth. When he had tasted the kernel and found how good it was, he fetched another acorn and set off with it to a secret hole he knew under the gnarled roots of a tall Pine. Long-tail, like the Squirrels, had the inborn instinct to make stores in Autumn. Already he had a good collection of grain and nuts safely hidden away underground; moreover, every day he enjoyed a feast of nuts and late berries, and his little body was unusually plump under his sleek brown coat.

"I wonder if they will find their stores easily," Brian said to himself, as he stood up at last and stamped on the ground to warm his feet.

Quite probably they would not find them all; perhaps some of the very trees that were rustling over Brian's head had sprung up from an acorn or a nut buried and forgotten by some Squirrel long, long ago.

Brian felt rather cold after sitting still for such a long time, so he decided to go for a brisk walk. He cut across the warren and came out of the wood on the rough ground near the Badger's boulders. As he passed through the long grass at the edge of the plantation of young

trees he startled a Woodcock. She was moulting her feathers, and resented his coming to her quiet retreat. She hurried away into the heart of the plantation, and Brian went on to the open moorland.

"Why, there's a big Humble-bee!" exclaimed Brian, and stood still to watch her fly across the patch of gorse-bushes.

The solitary Bee was a queen Humble-bee seeking a suitable crevice in which to settle down for her Winter sleep. She was the last of her colony, her "workers" and the drones were all dead, and she herself was feeling the chill of the Autumn air, and wanted to rest. She found a hole in a bank beside the boulders, and crept into it, to lie there till the warm days of Spring came again.

Beside the battered bracken Brian found an overturned tree, which sheltered a Wasps' nest among its gnarled roots. He touched the nest gently with a stick, and the outer layers broke away, showing the comb within, but no Wasps came out. The nest was deserted. All through the Summer the Wasp colony had worked busily; the queen had laid thousands of eggs, and her worker-daughters had cared for the young grubs, and fed them with the soft parts of insects and



sips of fruit-juice. They had kept the nest clean, and built new combs, and enlarged the grey paper canopy. They made the paper from wood-fibre, collected from trees and palings, and chewed into a pulp. When it hardened it made a covering that kept the nest warm and dry.

Many broods of worker-Wasps had been reared, but at the end of the Summer royal nurseries were built, and in these larger cells of the comb young queens and male Wasps were hatched. As soon as the chilly days of Autumn came and food grew scarce, the busy life of the colony came to an end. There were no stores of food, so the workers died of starvation, and with them the mother queen-Wasp. But the young queens were still alive, though Brian found none in the nest. Their mates were dead; but they had crept away to hide in crannies through the Winter. Before they hid themselves for their long sleep they had gobbled up all the grubs and eggs that were left in the nest, and this rather gruesome meal had to last them till the return of Spring.

Brian stooped to brush his stockings, which were covered with little prickly balls.

"Cleavers!" he said, and laughed when he found how they clung to his clothes.

Other seeds were being scattered besides the Cleavers, for as he stood there Brian could hear a gentle popping sound. The dry gorse-pods were splitting in the sunshine and shooting out a shower of polished black seeds all around. Dandeliondown and Thistledown were floating lightly on the breeze, and winged fruits were fluttering down from the Elms. The Pheasant would spread the Bramble-seeds, dropping them on new ground far from the patch by the stream; and the Heron, rising from the marsh where he was fishing, would bear away the seeds of water-plants in the mud clinging to his toes.

The flowers were fading, and the leaves were dying, but myriad seeds were being scattered broadcast over the land. Many would be lost, but some would fall on good soil, where next year new little plants would spring up. There were fewer insects to be seen now; a Butterfly flitting above the heather was a rare sight; but in secluded corners the pupæ or resting stages of their Caterpillars were tucked away. On a sprig of heather Brian noticed the hairy cocoon of some Moth. He did not touch it, for he knew that inside was a resting insect. Its active, hungry Caterpillar days were over; now it was hidden by a cradle it had woven for itself.



TIGER MOTH

Inside the cocoon the pupa would gradually become changed, and when, after long months, the protective covering was broken through, there would emerge, not a creeping Caterpillar but a perfect Moth, ready to try its wings in its first flight over the budding heather.

By this time the sun was at its highest, and Brian knew that it must be time for him to go home to mid-day dinner, so he wandered towards the stream. The air had become warmer, and the sunshine was so bright that it was difficult to realise that the Summer was over. But the greens of Windhover Wood had given place to fiery reds and golden-browns, and here and there bare branches showed among the thinning leaves; and under their shade, as Brian knew, the animals were preparing for the Winter. They went about their work light-heartedly, with no foreboding of hard times to come, content to enjoy the richness of the Autumn harvest.



## CHAPTER X

### HARD TIMES

**I**T was a stormy night in early Winter; the wind howled round the brown house on the knoll, and tore at the ragged branches of the stunted trees behind. It raced through Windhover Wood, sweeping the fallen leaves into the hollows, and heaping them up against rotting logs and tree-stumps. The bare branches tossed and creaked, and now and then one snapped clean off and crashed to the ground.

Then the rain came, noisy, pattering rain at first, blown hither and thither by the gusty wind; but after a time the gale died down, moaning faintly till it ceased altogether, and then the rain that fell straight to the ground was soft, steady, and almost silent. The wood became very wet. Towards dawn there was a lull, but few animals ventured forth. Though it was no longer raining, a heavy grey mist brooded over the trees, and everything was dark and dreary.

Among the damp leaves Earthworms were busy, for the night is their chief feeding time.

A large Earthworm was stretching out its ringed body to its full length, and slowly making a circle round the mouth of its burrow. It kept its tail inside the tunnel, so that it could jerk back quickly. It had no ears, but the trembling of the soil would warn it if anything was coming near. As it swept its circle it gathered in decaying leaves with its toothless mouth, drawing them close to the entrance of the burrow.

After a little the Worm descended the burrow, dragging with it some soft brown leaves. About two feet under the moss the burrow widened out into a chamber, where the Worm had quite a collection of leaves. It added the new load and covered it with juice from its mouth to make the leaves still softer and easier to eat. Countless other Earthworms were doing the same thing all through the woods and in the fields, tunnelling through the soil, and taking bits of plants underground. They would not eat nearly all of them, and so the leaves would lie there and rot and enrich the soil. This year's leaves were dead, their work on the trees was done, but the leaf-mould they made as they decayed in the ground would help to feed the seedlings of next year.

While Brian was waiting for breakfast he stood at the dining-room window gazing out at the



wet grass beyond the gravel path. A big Blackbird was hopping about on the cropped turf. The Worms which lay resting near the mouths of their burrows, as they like to do in the early morning, shrank back when they felt a tremor in the soil. But the Blackbird was too quick for one of them, and Brian saw a large Worm dragged out and swallowed. Even in their underground holes the Earthworms were not safe, for hungry Centipedes with sharp jaws followed them down to their retreats, and Velvet-coat, the Mole, has an appetite that is never quite satisfied.

"The early bird catches the Worm, Mother!" said Brian.

Mrs. West looked over his shoulder, saying, "Yes, there are lots of Worms in our little 'lawn'; you can tell that by the number of Worm-castings we always see there."

"These little brown heaps, you mean, just like very tiny Mole-hills?"

"Both are thrown up at the ends of tunnels; but the Mole burrows with his paws, while the Earthworm actually *eats* its way through the ground, and the soil you see in these little heaps is very fine, because it has been crushed to powder in the Worm's gizzard—a sort of mill—as it passed through its body."



"But they don't always eat their way along, do they?" Brian asked.

"Oh no, when the soil is loose they wriggle through it, but when it is firm or root-bound they have to eat their way through. Whichever way they tunnel it is very good for the ground; it breaks it up and lets air and rain get in, and makes passages down which tender rootlets can make their way. The Worms get some of their food out of the soil as it passes through their bodies, little bits of leaf-mould, but the actual earth is of no use to them and is thrown out as castings. But we mustn't stay here talking about Worms; the Blackbird has had his breakfast; let's have ours now!"

All day long the mist remained, and every now and then showers of rain fell on the wet woods and the sodden moorland. Brian could only go straight to Dr. Brown's and back again after lessons by the road. Even it was half-hidden by puddles, so he knew what the fields and the woods would be like, and knew that it was no day for exploring. But frost came in the night, and when Brian got up next morning, which was Saturday, there was a clear pale blue sky, with faint gleams of gold that promised a lovely day at last.

Brian lost no time after breakfast in setting

out for the woods. He decided first to walk to the old Camping-ground, from which he could get a good view of both woods and moor. The Birch-trees were very pretty even in their leafless state. Their silvery trunks shone, and their slender, drooping branches were tipped with tiny icicles, that were rapidly melting in the Winter sunshine. A number of them had thick bunches of twigs, like untidy Rooks' nests, on some of their branches. They had grown out where a fungus had attacked the tree.

“‘Witches’ brooms’!” said Brian, as he glanced up at them, black against the sky.

He walked a little way over the moor, and saw a number of birds, a band of speckled brown Fieldfares, Winter visitors that had recently arrived, and a little flock of Snow Buntings. These dainty birds flitted about with quick, jerky movements, showing the white feathers in their wings, and uttering soft notes as they darted to and fro. They had come from snow-bound lands farther north, to spend the Winter where food was less scarce, but they would fly north again in Spring to make their nests and rear their young.

Brian soon turned back, for the moorland was very wet, but he paused at the Camping-ground

to look across at the grey boulders where he and Dick had once seen a Badger. He wondered what had become of him now that the cold weather had set in.

"I expect he is asleep somewhere under these stones; perhaps there is a whole family of them there," he thought, remembering what Dick had told him of the complicated dwellings Badgers make underground.

At that very moment the old Badger they had seen in the moonlight was stirring slightly in his bed. He did not wake up, he did not even open his eyes, but he moved a little, and settled himself more comfortably on his soft mattress. Winter had not caught him unawares, he had made his bed in good time. On fine Autumn nights he had brought load after load of dry brown bracken to his home below the boulders, dragging it along his passages, and piling it in a chosen room. A night came when the frost was so severe that the Badger did not set out on his usual nightly rounds; instead he pulled the bracken a little closer to him and shut his sleepy eyes again.

The Badger had fed well during the Autumn, and there was a thick layer of fat under his bristly coat, so he did not feel cold. He only

felt very, very drowsy; and so he settled down to have many long sleeps during the cold season. Sometimes, when a mild spell came, he slept very lightly, and even woke occasionally, so he was rather different from the Hedgehogs, who had settled down to a sleep that would not be broken till Spring came.

The heather had lost its bright colours, but the withered, battered bracken looked like old gold in the sun, and purple leaves still clung to the long, thorny trails of the Brambles. Brian left the edge of the moor and skirted the warren, where a startled Rabbit scurried across his path. The Rabbits were not among the Winter sleepers and snoozers and they had to be warier than ever, for the frost had sharpened the appetites of their enemies, Fire-eyes and Reynard.

Brian could not walk very quietly as he neared the Squirrels' haunt, for the rime-covered Beech-leaves rustled under his feet. When he kicked aside the whitened leaves he found that those underneath were dark and sodden. The air was full of the peculiar smell of rotting Beech-leaves. The branches of the Beech-trees were almost bare, but a little twisted Oak was still covered with withered brown leaves, among which were a great many round brown Oak-apples, the



little galls which the tree forms round intruding grubs.

There was quite a comfortable perch on this stunted Oak, so Brian hoisted himself up and waited quietly to see what would happen. Presently he noticed a dainty little Tit on a low branch quite close to him. It was holding a small nut in one foot, pressing it against the branch, while it hammered on the shell with its beak. Brian could hear the faint tap-tap in the stillness of the wood. The Tit flew away, startled by the noisy approach of a Wood-Pigeon, which alighted beneath the Beeches and began to scrape among the leaves for the fallen Beech-mast.

When the Wood-Pigeon had gone, Brian saw no sign of life for some time, and as he was feeling cold he was just thinking of leaving the Oak-tree when the Squirrels suddenly appeared. They did not seem to find the times hard, for they were as frisky as ever.

"Isn't it jolly to be out again?" said Red-flash to Russet, as he raced along a high branch of a Beech-tree close behind her.

For several days they had hardly left their snug home. They felt very drowsy whenever these cold, grey days came. But this morning, with a blue sky showing above the bare branches

and the sun shining bravely, who would stay in a dark hole, even though it was softly lined and cosy? So out they came for breakfast and a frolic. Nuts were still to be found lying among the leaves, so there was no need to break into their store-rooms.

With a sudden spring Red-flash left the tree and shot down to the ground. He landed lightly on a heap of Beech-leaves that had drifted into a hole. He sank among the crisp, frosted leaves, and then quickly scrambled out. Russet followed him an instant later, and then with one accord they ran up another tree and chose other jumping-off places. Down they flashed again, landing close together among the leaves. It was a splendid game!

Brian could not repress a laugh, and in a moment the two playful Squirrels had disappeared up a thick Spruce-tree. So he decided to go home, and leave them to their games. "Just like boys jumping down a sand-bank!" he said to himself as he walked away.

Brian had been invited to tea with Roger and Elsie Brown that afternoon, so he started off soon after dinner and walked quickly along the road. The sun was hidden by the gathering clouds, and the air was very cold.

"I expect even the Squirrels will be glad to go to sleep soon," he thought, for he knew that they were among the animals which avoid the hard times by snoozing, though they were not deep sleepers like the Hedgehog.

He buttoned up his coat-collar and walked briskly on. Before he reached Dr. Brown's house he saw Roger and Elsie coming out of the gate. They waved their hands to him.

"Tom says there is a Bat in the old shed," said Roger, when they met, "shall we go and look at him?"

Brian agreed at once, so they left the road, and crossed the field to a black shed that was used for storing various things belonging to a neighbouring farm. They scrambled over a pile of sacking and some spades, and climbed up the big wheel of a cart. When they were all three in the cart—Elsie had to be pulled up by the two boys—they searched the cobwebby rafters for the Bat the farm-lad had told Roger about. It was Elsie who saw it first.

"There he is!" she cried, excitedly.

There was no fear of startling the Bat by their voices, for he was sound asleep. He looked rather like a withered leaf at first glance. He was hanging by his toes to the rafter, with his head

downwards, and his wings wrapped closely about his little body.

"What a funny way to sleep!" chuckled Brian.

"Will he really sleep all Winter?" Roger asked.

"Yes," replied Brian, "if nobody touches him. Quite a lot of animals sleep through the cold weather. There's the Hedgehog, who rolls himself up in a tight ball in a hole under the leaves and never stirs all Winter. He gets fat in Autumn, and that has to keep him going, for he doesn't have any more food till Spring. He is only just alive and no more, breathing very, very feebly."

The boys climbed out of the cart and helped Elsie down.

"Is it tea-time?" said Elsie.

"You're always hungry, Elsie!" said her brother, laughing. "I expect it will be tea-time by the time we get back to the house and get all this dust off our hands."

While they were having tea Roger noticed Brian looking at a photograph of a waterfall that hung on the wall, and he said, "Have you ever been there, Brian?"

"I don't think so," said Brian; "where is it?"

"That's our own river, but miles farther up," Roger waved vaguely towards the north; "it isn't half so wide there, and it is very swift,

with lots of rapids and that big fall. Daddy took me there a few weeks ago in his motor, and we saw the Salmon jumping."

"I've seen Salmon jumping for flies in our bit of the river——"

"Oh, but that's different," said Roger, eagerly; "when we saw them there were dozens, hundreds, all racing up the river as fast as they could go, and leaping up the waterfall. It *was* fun to watch them! Some of them seemed to get up quite easily and shoot on upstream through the smooth water above the waterfall, but some of them fell back into the pool below and had to try again."

"I wish I had seen them," said Brian.

"Daddy said they were going up the river to find a good spawning ground," Roger went on; "they had been down at the sea and had grown big and strong, but when Autumn came they had to come up the rivers, because they never spawn in the sea."

"It's just the other way round with Eels. Have you seen the Eel-fare, Roger?"

Roger shook his head.

"Neither have I," said Brian, "I hope we'll see it in Spring. Daddy says thousands and thousands of tiny Eels come up the rivers and



the streams. They are hatched far away in the Atlantic Ocean, and they travel right across the sea and up the rivers, and even across land, till they reach inland pools. Some of them stay in the streams, of course, but they seem to find their way to all sorts of ponds and pools."

"And none of them are hatched there?"

"Never. After Eels have lived in fresh water for a good many years they go on their travels again, downstream this time, to that breeding place in the Atlantic. The big Eels travel on dark Autumn nights, so I don't suppose we have much chance of seeing them, but we must look out for the little Elvers in Spring. They swim up the stream in the daylight."

After tea they were just starting a game when Mrs. Brown said, "I am afraid Brian will have to go now, if he wishes to get home before it is dark."

When she saw how disappointed they were she said that Roger might go as far as the short cut with Brian, so the two boys set off together. The short cut was a path which crossed a field quite close to the river and cut off a big bend in the road.

"Good - night, Roger!" said Brian, as he climbed over the fence and dropped into the field.

He could hardly see the path in the twilight, and the river shone dimly through a low cloud of evening mist. Just before the path took him away from the river again Brian heard a strange whistle. He paused and listened, but it was not repeated. He could see nothing moving, so he walked on, wondering.

If Brian had only known it, the Otter he so much longed to see was within a dozen yards of him. It had whistled to its mate; and now it was rolling quietly over in the river, without a splash or ripple to betray its presence. But Brian was walking quickly back to the road. He saw a few Rooks returning to their roosting-place among the Pines not far from the village, and a Wood-Pigeon flying high over the trees of Windhover Wood.

It was nearly dark by the time Brian reached the wicket-gate at the foot of Windhover knoll. He turned and gazed across the stream, wondering what the shadows hid. Some of the animals in the wood must be finding it difficult to get their supper nowadays, for they did not all cheat the Winter by a deep sleep. One keen-eyed hunter was watching Brian from the shelter of the trees, though the little boy never guessed it. It was one of the Fox-cubs from the Pine-

wood edge. Vixen no longer hunted with them, they were big enough to fend for themselves. Fox-cub and boy both started as a loud cry broke the stillness. It was the hoot of the Tawny Owl, sounding eerie in the darkness.



OTTER

## CHAPTER XI

### THE SNOWSTORM

ONE afternoon in midwinter the Squirrels in the old Beech-tree felt too tired to play. The young ones ran a little way along the branches, but the biting wind from the east seemed to take all the liveliness out of them, and they came listlessly back to the hole in the tree-trunk, crept inside and curled themselves up close together. Red-flash and Russet, who were usually as playful as their children, peeped out in their turn, but the heavy grey clouds in the sky, and the keen wind that ruffled their thick fur coats, made the parent Squirrels decide also that this was no day to be outside. Moreover their limbs felt strangely heavy, they would not be able to run and jump, so it would be wiser to stay safely at home.

About the same time Stumpy, the wise old Squirrel, was calling to her crowd of troublesome children to come into their nest in the dark Fir-tree in the heart of Windhover Wood. They were more ready to return home than usual, for

they too felt a curious drowsiness creeping over them and numbing their active legs. They were in no mood for an evening frolic.

Red-flash and Russet went back into the hole, and, when they had blocked up the doorway with dry leaves and moss, settled themselves beside their drowsy family. Five little bodies relaxed, in a few minutes every one of them was asleep, lying limp and motionless. Usually their sleep was fitful, one or other of them continually twitching or waking and turning about restlessly, but now they all lay still and silent in the dark nest. The snow sleep had come upon them.

The grey sky grew darker and darker, and the cold wind whistled more loudly among the swaying trees. The dead leaves rose up in rustling clouds, and danced along the woodland paths, and swirled about the tree-trunks. Birds with fluffed-up feathers took shelter among the thick evergreen trees, like Stumpy's spreading Fir-tree. Rabbits scuttled to their burrows, as they sensed the coming storm.

Down came the snow, first a few scattered flakes drifting on the wind; then suddenly the air was full of it, falling thick and fast. It covered the bare branches of the Beeches with lines of



white, and weighed down the fans of the Spruces. The dancing leaves were beaten down and buried under a smother of snow. Every bit of green and brown was hidden. The grey sky itself was seen no more. Brian, looking out of the dining-room window at Windhover, could see nothing at all but whirling snowflakes. By-and-by the darkness of night crept on, hiding the falling snow.

When he woke the next morning Brian felt sure that it must still be snowing, there was such complete silence, not a note from any bird, not even from the cheerful Robin that usually piped before breakfast, and not so much as a rustle from the muffled trees behind the house. He drew aside the curtains. Snow was falling, but the wind had dropped and the big flakes were floating very slowly down.

After breakfast there was a brief lull, and Brian opened the window and scattered some crumbs on the ledge. In a moment the Robin appeared, and came fearlessly to the crumbs. Sometimes Brian had seen him come right into the room after a meal when the window had been left open, and search the carpet for fallen crumbs.

"The other birds must be hungry, Mother," said Brian.

Mrs. West glanced out of the window. "Here comes more snow," she said, "it is no use putting out food just now, it would be covered up in a few minutes."

All day long it snowed, and through another night, and still the sky showed no signs of clearing. Sometimes the wind rose and blew the fallen snow into deep drifts, and cleared some of the branches of their loads for a time. But more snow came, and soon every tree was white again. The whole countryside was smothered in snow, soft crumbling snow as yet.

For several days Brian had not been able to go out, but at last one evening the snow stopped falling, though the air was often full of swirls of it, caught up from the ground and blown about by the wind.

"May I go out, Mother?" Brian asked, and Mrs. West said he might go as far as the wicket-gate.

He trudged through the snow, which often came up to the tops of his long rubber boots and nearly held him fast. On the side of the knoll walking was a little easier, for the path had been swept by the wind, so he managed to reach the little gate at the foot of the knoll.

Through a cloud of drifting snow he suddenly

saw three big shadows. The air cleared; and three big Red Deer stood before him. They gazed at him curiously with their big dark eyes, then they tossed back their heads and trotted round to the back of the knoll, scattering the snow with their hoofs. Brian heard later that their tracks had been seen quite close to Moor-end Farm, and that the hungry animals had found a store of turnips and made a hearty supper.

The stormy days were hard ones for many of the animals. Red-flash and Russet and their family did not suffer, nor Stumpy and her crowd of youngsters, for they slept soundly through it all. Bats and Hedgehogs never stirred in their death-like sleep; and the Badgers lay still with the fires of their life burning very low. But for the animals that were not winter-sleepers, the snowstorm brought many hardships.

In the evenings, when the snow was not actually falling, Puff and the other Rabbits came out of their burrows. They scraped the snow aside till they reached the grass and moss below, but this was not an easy way to get a meal, and many of them contented themselves with nibbling the bark of the nearest tree-trunks. They grew thin and weak, and were an easy prey to the hungry hunters of the woods.

Reynard the Fox was hungrier than ever these days, and grew bolder and bolder. Vixen and the cubs might be satisfied with half-starved Rabbits for supper, *he* would look farther afield. So vigorous was he that the deep snow could not keep him from roaming where he would, and he took to prowling round Farmer Hale's yard. For several nights in succession he managed to get through a break in the wire-netting and make a raid on one of the fowl-houses.

Another of the nightly visitors to Moor-end Farm was Fire-eyes the Weasel. Like a little shadow he slipped across the silent white yard, and paused and sniffed beside the hen-house. His little eyes glowed. What a splendid smell! He was really hungry. Up the side of the shed he climbed, till he reached a small hole that he could squirm through. The frightened hens raised a great clamour, but Fire-eyes did not heed them, as he made his fatal spring. When he had satisfied his hunger he raised his head and listened. Towser was barking, and the Weasel thought it best to retreat.

But Farmer Hale soon made the fowl-houses secure against the attacks of both Fox and Weasel, who had left clear tracks behind them to tell of their guilt. At night he chained Towser

close to the hens, and Reynard sniffed him long before he reached the spot, and turned back and made for the warren. Fire-eyes was not so easily headed away, but this time his hunting met with the farmer's approval.

He gave Towser a wide berth and crept round to the big barn, and soon found a way in. Squeaks and rustlings greeted him, and beady black eyes were turned towards him. Rats and rats and rats! Fire-eyes was in a fighting mood; the sight of much booty always roused him to a perfect fury. The Rats, if they had combined to attack him, might well have driven off the little brown terror, but they seemed paralysed with fear, and one after another went down before him. Fire-eyes never missed his aim, one spring he made, and his teeth closed like a vice on the Rat's neck. Egg-thieves and chicken-killers like himself, the Rats were helpless in the face of this terrible enemy. Fire-eyes was tired of it at last, and he stole silently away. He had enjoyed many a draught of blood.

"That was good hunting," he said to himself, "better than tunnelling in the snow after Mice!"

Many Mice had been forced to seek food and shelter in houses and barns, but Long-tail managed to exist in Windhover Wood. He was



glad of his store of nuts and acorns these days, for he did not go to sleep, and would have found it difficult to get food except in his own little store-room. He had a two-chambered nest under the roots of an old Pine-tree, and in one room he kept his nuts and acorns, so that he could stay at home when the weather was bad. On milder days he would tunnel through the snow, and have a peep at the world outside.

They were hard days for the birds too. Brian had seen a Wood-Pigeon, dazed by a flurry of snow, dash itself against one of the trees on the knoll, and flutter away, trailing a damaged wing. While the snow was falling he could do nothing for the birds, but one morning he woke to find a sparkling world under a clear pale blue sky. Frost had come in the night, hardening the snow, and now the sun was shining and the crystals were glittering.

"It is like Fairyland!" exclaimed Brian.

Then he thought of the birds. As soon as breakfast was over he collected all the scraps of bread and bacon, and went to the kitchen to forage for more food for the birds. He soaked stale crusts in warm water, and mixed everything up on a big flat dish, then he pulled on his rubber boots and went outside. The frosted

snow felt crisp under his feet as he walked across to the little patch of grass in front of the house.

When he came back to the door after setting down the dish of food, and another of water, he was met by his mother carrying a big bone.

"What are you doing with the bone, Mother?" he exclaimed, laughing.

"There is quite a lot of fat about it, and the Tits will love it," replied Mrs. West, handing it to him. "Here is a piece of string; you can tie it to the trellis, Brian."

A screen of trellis-work had been put up quite near the house to support a rambler-rose, but it had nearly fallen to pieces during the Winter. Brian found a suitable place to hang the bone so that it swung freely at the end of the piece of string. When he had made the knot secure he hurried back to the house to make sure that both the dish and the bone were easily seen from the dining-room window.

"You will have to sit very quiet, Brian," said Mrs. West, "or the birds won't come."

So Brian drew a chair close up to the window, but kept the curtains about him so that he could look out without being seen.

"They must be hungry after the snowstorm," he said, "for there are no berries left on the

hedges, and they can't find grubs and worms in this weather."

"I expect some of the grain-eating birds have found their way to Mr. Hale's rickyard," said Mrs. West, "but many birds must be finding it difficult to get a meal these days. Are they coming yet?"

"Oh, there's our own Robin!" whispered Brian.

"He is never very far away," said Mrs. West, "I heard him singing this morning before breakfast."

"He looks quite plump anyway;—here comes a Song-Thrush, and Robin has gone, carrying a crumb in his beak."

The Song-Thrush certainly seemed to be hungry, though he approached the dish cautiously, pausing between each hop and looking about him. But when Robin flew off, he suddenly made up his mind, and perched on the edge of the dish and began his breakfast. Presently he was joined by three Starlings, whose feathers glinted with green and copper tints when they caught the sunlight.

The Starlings walked round and round the dish and pulled out pieces of food, till the snow was strewn with fragments. They walked right

through the water, splashing it out of the dish. Something startled them all suddenly, and for a few minutes the breakfast-table was deserted; but before long other visitors came. A dull brown Hedge-Sparrow came and snatched a morsel, but did not linger; then a pretty Chaffinch alighted close to the dish, and hopped about for a few minutes, picking daintily at the scattered crumbs. He was followed a short time later by a Hen-Chaffinch, much less brightly coloured than himself.

"Oh, there's a Tit, Mother; do look!" whispered Brian, excitedly.

Mrs. West came quietly to the window and peeped through the curtains at the bone on the trellis.

"Yes," she said, "a Blue Tit. Isn't he pretty?"

The Blue Tit had a yellow breast and a bright blue cap. The blue showed too in the feathers of his wings and tail, while the sides of his head were white, with a distinct dark streak beside the eye. In his movements he was very neat and nimble, and he seemed to be enjoying himself very much at the swinging bone. He perched on the trellis and put his head on one side and looked down at the bone. Then he let himself down by the string, clinging to it with his tiny

toes. When he reached the bone it began to twirl round and round, so he twirled with it, pecking all the time at the soft fat. Away he flitted suddenly; but a moment later he appeared on the bone again, clinging to its underside and pecking rapidly.

"He comes and goes like a flash," said Brian. "He's gone! Now he's back; no, it's a different one, a bigger one this time."

"That is a Great Tit, Brian. Look at his black cap, and the black all round his white cheek patch."

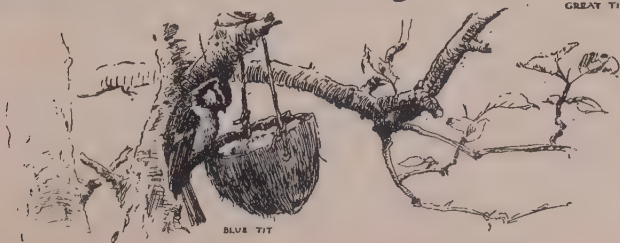
"He has got a black streak right down the middle of his yellow waistcoat too, Mother," said Brian; "look at him hanging upside-down while he feeds!"

All morning the Tits were to be seen at the bone, sometimes a Blue Tit and sometimes a Great Tit, and once Brian saw a third kind, smaller than the Great Tit, and without the black line down its breast. There was a patch of white on its neck below its black cap. It was a Coal Tit, that had come up from the woods.

The frost lasted for several days, and Brian fed the birds every morning. Blackbirds and Thrushes, Chaffinches and Tits, were regular visitors, and once or twice a Redwing came.



GREAT TIT



BLUE TIT



The Robin was the boldest of all, and had his own breakfast-table on the window-ledge. The Earthworms had tunnelled deep into the soil, out of reach of the frost, and the birds could not get at them. Even the Holly-berries were all gone, so the birds were glad to get soaked bread for breakfast. Brian had put out water, for he knew that birds need plenty to drink. They did not seem to come much to his water-dish, however, even while the hard frost lasted. This was probably because the stream was never frozen over though ice formed at its sides.

The pools on the moor and the Pond in the Pine-wood were frozen hard, and no fishers could get at the Frogs and Eels lying torpid in the mud below the ice. Times were hard indeed for fishers and hunters. One day Brian's father took him for a tramp, and they found tracks in the snow that told their own tale. Near Moor-end Farm they found the track of an Otter, and followed it to the bank of the river. The marks of its webbed feet were unmistakable, and by their different positions they could tell when the Otter had been walking and when she had been galloping.

"I expect it was a mother Otter, foraging for her young, for the cubs are often born in mid-

winter," said Mr. West. "Here she has been jumping along; look, the tracks are in pairs."

"I wonder if she caught anything at the Farm," said Brian.

"A duck or a hen perhaps," suggested Mr. West; "I expect the babies are hungry these days. Poor things, they must have been nearly buried under the snow. Luckily the river is not frozen, so there will still be a chance for the Otter to fish. Sometimes Otters get trapped under the ice when they are seeking food there, if the breathing-holes freeze over quickly."

At the river-bank the footprints vanished, and a deep furrow marked the slope of snow.

"She must have slid down the bank into the water," said Brian.

"Yes, and I should think it was her rudder-like tail that made that deep groove, covering up her other marks," agreed Mr. West.

As they made their way from the river across the fields to Windhover Wood they found other tracks, faint marks of birds' toes, little tunnels that suggested Mice and larger ones where the Weasel had been; tracks of farm animals and men's footprints; and once a bloodstained, confused maze on the white ground, that told of a struggle between two foes.

"I think the frost is over," said Mr. West, "the surface seems to be thawing at last, and the sun is getting stronger."

In Windhover Wood there was sure proof that the stormy weather was passing, and that the air was slightly warmer, for when they reached the Squirrels' haunt they caught a glimpse of a brown form crossing the ground and flashing up a tree-trunk.

That morning Red-flash had wakened at last from the snow sleep. He stirred in the nest and blinked at the sunbeams that were stealing in through the chinks at the doorway. Russet and the young ones began to twitch and turn. A few minutes later they were all wide awake. Red-flash opened the door by pulling aside the moss and leaves, and the fresh air blew in. It was still very cold, but the sun was shining, and the Squirrel family ventured forth.

"I'm hungry!" they cried in chorus.

Away they scampered, knocking the snow off the branches and breaking through the frosted surface when they jumped to the ground. It was a strange white world, quite unlike their familiar wood; no grass, no leaves, no sticks on the ground, just a smooth white carpet. Only the outlines of the trees were familiar, and even they

were changed. The snow had fallen from many of the bare branches, but still weighed down the spreading branches of the Spruce-trees. Many a twig was tipped with a shining icicle. In spite of all the glitter and the whiteness the Squirrels knew where they would find their breakfast, and before very long each one of them had made a good meal.

Over the snow went Red-flash, hunger giving special keenness to his nose. He stopped, and began to dig. The snow flew in all directions. Through snow and earth he dug, and presently he sat erect, holding a fine big nut in his paws. The other Squirrels found their stores too, and fell upon them hungrily.

The Squirrels were soon as frisky as ever. They had slept peacefully through the days of snow, and when they awoke food was close at hand, so they fared better than many of the other wood-folk. But better days were coming for all the animals. The swaying branches showed that the wind had veered round to the southwest; blue sky and fleecy white clouds had taken the place of heavy greyness, and pale gold sunbeams danced on the snow. The drip-drip of melting icicles was heard among the trees. The storm was over.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE STORY OF SOLOMON

ABOUT the time when Brian came to live at Windhover, a baby Rook was hatched in a nest high up in a tall Elm-tree. In the nests all around there were families of newly-hatched nestlings, or clutches of three or even five bluish-green eggs; but in this nest there had been for several days only one egg. High up though the nest was, a boy from the village had climbed the tree and taken away two eggs. The Mother Rook had come home from a brief visit to a neighbouring field and looked at the nest for a moment, hopped all round it, then fluffed up her feathers and settled down to keep the remaining egg warm.



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She did not often leave the nest, but sat there for hours with the egg pressed against a bare patch on her breast, and her soft feathers wrapped round it. Her mate brought her food when he returned from the fields. She greeted him with an excited "caw," and stretched up her open beak to receive the morsel.

Then one day the blue-green egg split open, and a big-mouthed nestling freed himself from the shell. He was feeble and blind, and his skin was bare except for a few wisps of down. But, within a week, patches of feathers had sprouted and grown till they hid the bare places on his body. The young Rook grew apace, and no wonder, for his parents had only one baby to feed, while most of the neighbours had three or four hungry youngsters.

The Mother Rook was careful to keep the nest clean, throwing out all refuse with her beak. While she brooded over the young bird she often preened her glossy feathers, which gleamed with purple and green in the sunlight. The Father Rook still brought her food, though she left the nest more frequently now. He would come home with his food-pouch full, and share the meal with his mate and the little one. He moved the tit-bits from the pouch to the tip of his beak

with the help of his tongue, and popped them into the gaping mouths.

As soon as the young Rook saw one of his parents coming near the nest, he began to "caw" loudly and open his mouth wide, showing the dark colour of his palate. However often they came, he still seemed hungry. The Rookery was always in an uproar these days, with dozens of fledglings clamouring for food.

When the young Rook was about a month old he was fully fledged, with glinting black feathers like his parents', but while they had bare greyish patches of skin on the sides of their faces he had a soft feathery black growth right up to the base of his beak. He began to feel restless, and liked to stretch himself to his full height in the nest and flap his wings.

One day he climbed on to the edge of the nest and looked about him. His parents had left him alone, but all around there was a coming and going of the neighbours. He looked up. The nest was in the fork of two strong branches, and there were a good many other branches and three other nests overhead. The young Rook decided to go exploring. He sidled along one of the branches, stretching his wings occasionally to keep his balance. Then he hopped to another

branch and walked along it. From the tip he got a clear view of the Elms. One of them had a particularly inviting branch at the very top of it.

For a few minutes the Rook looked at the Elm-top, and then suddenly, to his own surprise, he spread his wings and flew, waveringly and awkwardly, across the space, and landed on the branch he had picked out. He looked round him, preened his neck feathers a little, settled his wings, and sank lower on the branch to rest. After a little he wanted to go home. It would be quite easy. There was the nest across there, he had only to float down to it. He could almost look into it through the leaves from where he sat.

He began his second flight with more confidence, but something unexpected happened. Just as he launched himself out of the tree, a playful little wind rushed round the corner and caught him unawares. Instead of arriving on his own home-tree, he was blown to one side, clear of the Elms altogether.

"Caw-w-w!" he cried, "Mother!"

In an instant his parents flew to his side. They had been watching him from the tree for some moments. With "caws" of encouragement they told him to keep on flapping, and in a few

moments they had guided him safely home to the nest.

After that the young Rook made rapid progress and could soon fly quite well. His parents gave up feeding him, and he flew to the fields with the other birds. A whole band of them would settle on a field and walk about it hunting intently for grubs and maggots, and snails and slugs. Sometimes a Rook that had remained in a nearby tree would give a loud "caw" of warning, and they would rise in a flapping cloud and fly round and round for a few minutes, presently settling on another field.

Sometimes the Rook ate some young corn or new potatoes, but usually he searched among the crops for Wire-worms and insect grubs of all kinds. He was very fond of juicy Cockchafer grubs, and a really plump Slug was a great treat. The farmer did not grudge the Rooks a little of his grain and potatoes, because he was very glad to get rid of the harmful insect grubs that were the birds' chief food.

The Rooks would not allow strange birds to come too near them; they rose and pursued the intruders till they left the fields that were the Rooks' special feeding-ground. As the Summer passed their noontide rest became longer and

longer. In the heat of the day they felt drowsy and disinclined to move, but in the fresh mornings and the cool evenings they loved to fly high over the fields in sweeping circles.

When Autumn came the young Rook delighted in the boisterous winds. Sometimes it was difficult to fly, and he was buffeted to and fro, but sometimes he could just spread out his broad wings and sail without exertion on the racing wind. By this time the Rooks had left the Rookery. Many families had grown up there during the Summer, but now the leaves were falling from the Elms, and the Rooks took to sleeping in the Pine-wood.

All went well with the young Rook till the time of the great snowstorm. His hard time began when he found all his favourite fields buried under a thick blanket of snow. He and his companions scattered and searched the fields for places where the wind had blown away the crumbling snow, and exposed bare earth that they could probe with their strong black beaks. But more snow fell, and frost came, turning the powdery snow to ice, and making the ground iron-hard.

One day the young Rook was so hungry that he visited Moor-end Farm and tried to pull



grain out of a stack in the yard, but he was soon driven away from there. He and two or three others drifted across to Windhover knoll. A number of birds gathered in front of the house attracted their attention.

"Food!" cried the Rooks in chorus.

They swooped down on Brian's dish of bird-food, and began to gobble up the soaked bread as fast as they could. The other birds had scattered when the Rooks arrived, and dared not come back till they had finished their meal and flown away again.

"Caw! Caw!" cried the Rooks, and flapped away towards the woods.

The Rooks came again to feed at Windhover, and found the dish nearly empty. They were very hungry. There was one piece of bacon fat still on the dish. The young Rook made a grab at it under the very beak of an old Rook that had joined the foraging party. Perhaps hunger had sharpened the old Rook's temper, perhaps he thought the youngster needed a lesson. He gave him a sharp blow above the wing with his beak.

"Caw! Caw! Caw! Caw!"

What a furious uproar! The Rooks rose in the air, and with them the young Rook. He

faltered, and returned to the ground, cawing loudly with fear and pain. Over his head the others circled, cawing sympathy and encouragement, even the old Rook that had dealt the blow. But the young Rook could not fly, or he thought he could not; he was dazed with hunger and the smarting pain in his shoulder.

So it was that Brian found him. The little boy looked rather doubtfully at the big black bird with the strong beak.

"Daddy," he shouted, "here's a Rook with a broken wing!"

The wing was not broken, as Mr. West soon found out, but the bird was obviously hurt, so they took him indoors. He was rather too big and fierce to handle, so presently they put him in a disused chicken-coop with a netted run beside it. A good meal made Solomon, as Brian promptly named the Rook, feel more cheerful, but he still trailed his wing in a curious way, and spent most of his time cowering in a corner of the coop.

Solomon stayed at Windhover long after the snow had melted. He became quite friendly, and walked about his enclosure, peeping out first at this side then at that to see if Brian was coming. He would eat anything from Worms to hard-

boiled eggs and chunks of apple. He kept his glossy feathers in splendid condition. His wound healed quickly, but Brian did not want to set him free, and as Solomon seemed quite content, Mr. West allowed Brian to keep him a little longer in captivity.

After the snowstorm there followed a time of rain and floods. The rain beat down on the snow, turning it to grey slush that melted quickly and trickled down the slopes till every hollow was full of water. The river, which in Summer-time had flowed so placidly, became a rushing brown torrent, tearing at its banks and gathering up every loose clod and branch within reach. Where the banks were low, it overtopped them and flooded the meadows. People leant over the parapets of the bridges, noticing how hour by hour the swirling waters rose higher against the arches; and cottagers near the river looked on anxiously while the rising flood crept closer and closer.

The streams were swollen and turbulent. The little stream that wandered through the Pine-wood down to the village rose out of its channel and swished round the tree-trunks. The water-



fall on the moor roared loudly as it splashed into the brown Pool below, and thick masses of yellow foam were stranded at the margin. The stepping-stones below Windhover knoll were covered by the rushing water, and in the fields beyond the bridge the stream rose higher and higher between its banks. It covered the openings of some of the Water-Voles' tunnels, forcing the animals to leave their homes. Occasionally a little draggled body was swept down to the river along with the stream's load of sand and sticks and matted grasses.

Gradually the floods subsided. The river kept within bounds, but on the meadows lay pools of water that, sinking in, left an untidy layer of silt and straw and broken branches. The streams grew smaller and, as the mud settled, lost their dark colour and became clear and sparkling once more. The stepping-stones appeared again, dry and clean and enticing. Brian spent a whole hour jumping from one to another the first day he found them above water again.

Grey days followed, days when the sun never struggled through the clouds, and when wisps of mist clung about the shining black branches of the trees. Brian did not see much of the

animals at this season, but once when he woke in the night he heard the bark of a Fox in the woods below, and then the eerie, gasping cry of its answering mate.

The weeks slipped past, and fair days came more frequently; and even the rainy days were different, the rain was softer, and the winds that blew it against the window-panes brought with them a faint perfume. Buds on the trees were swelling, and Snowdrops in the garden were appearing, fresh green blades and drooping white bells, above the damp leaf-mould.

One day Brian was standing beside Solomon's run, watching him playing with a twig. It was a branched twig, awkward to hold, and Solomon pulled it this way and that, laid it in a corner, took it out again, and looked at it with a wise expression on his face.

"I believe he wants to make a nest!" Brian called out to his mother, who was hoeing the path.

"He is rather young for that," she replied, "he has not lost the feathers round his beak yet, he can hardly be a year old. I don't think Rooks build nests till their second year. I expect he is just playing."

Solomon dropped the stick and, putting his



head on one side, looked up at the sky. Brian looked up too. It was a beautiful morning in early Spring. Against the blue of the sky he saw three Rooks flying towards the woods. He watched them for a long time. They were heading towards the Rookery near the village.

Brian looked down at Solomon. He hesitated for a moment, then stooped and unfastened the door of the run and opened it wide. For a few minutes nothing happened, then Solomon walked forward and came out. He looked about him, walked a little way along the gravel path, then suddenly spread his wings and rose in the air. There was no clumsiness about his flight, though his wings had been idle for weeks. With steady, powerful strokes he flew away towards the woods. Brian looked after him till he became a mere black speck.

"I am very glad you have set him free, Brian," said his mother, quietly.

"His wound was healed—no good keeping him cooped up," said Brian, rather gruffly, as stuffing his hands into his pockets, he turned and strolled away.

It was the time of courtship among the Rooks, two-year-old cock-birds were wooing mates for the first time, while older Rooks were wooing

again their mates of past Springs. They strutted before them, spreading out their glossy wings and tails, and bowing and cawing. They brought them love-gifts, the juiciest morsels they could find, and the hen-birds cawed their thanks.

A couple of weeks later, when Brian visited the Rookery, nest-building had begun. Brian knew he could not hope to pick out Solomon among the throng that had taken possession of the Elms, but he wanted to see what the Rooks' home-life was like, so on a balmy Spring morning he walked to the Rookery. He found a hiding-place in a little thicket beside the Elms, from which he could watch the birds without disturbing them.

Some of the Rooks were building new nests, others were tidying up those they had used last year. They were made of twigs, and Brian could see Rooks bringing sticks of all shapes and sizes to add to the nests, or sometimes long grasses or leaves to line them with, and make them soft for the eggs that would soon be laid there. While they worked they made a great deal of noise, cawing to one another. Brian watched one pair sitting idly at the edge of their half-made nest. Presently one of them decided that it was time to add a few more sticks, but he was too

lazy to fly to the wood and choose a nice twig from the trees there, so he merely flew to the nearest nest and helped himself.

Immediately there was an angry protest from the owners of the nest, who came back just in time to see the robber making off with his prize. They flew after him, pecking at him and his mate, and a number of neighbours promptly joined in, harrying the pair till they managed to escape to the woods. There was not much thieving among the Rooks, but there was a good deal of squabbling about sites for their homes. Two couples often fixed on the same forking branch as the best place, and when, after a good deal of cawing and ruffling of feathers, the victorious pair began to build, one of them had to mount guard while the other went to fetch the twigs, in case the other pair should renew the attack.

Brian turned away and walked rapidly towards Windhover Wood, with the cawing of the Rooks still ringing in his ears. He cut across the wood by the path he and Dick had taken last Summer to the Camping-ground, and strolled across the moorland to the Badger's boulders. Among the stones he found a tumbled heap of withered bracken, so he knew that the Badger had wakened

from the last of his cold weather snoozes and had been Spring-cleaning his home, and throwing out the Winter bedding.

Indeed, all the sleepers had awakened. Tom, the farm-lad, had heard a faint squeaking in the rafters of the old shed that morning. The Bats were stirring. That other deep sleeper, the Hedgehog, had crept from his hole, and stretched his cramped limbs, and filled his lungs with Spring air. He was ravenously hungry after his long fast, and as soon as he was quite awake he trotted off to look for Worms and grubs for his first meal of the year. The Frogs had come out of their hiding-places, and were croaking their love-calls to one another in the marsh.

As Brian passed beneath the rose-tufted Larches, a pair of bright eyes watched him from an upper branch, and a red-brown streak crossed from tree to tree over his head. Red-flash, curious as ever, followed him at a safe distance till he left the wood; and Brian, hearing the rattling of tiny claws on the bark, gave one glance up and then pretended he had seen nothing, lest he should scare the Squirrel away.

He crossed the stream by the stepping-stones, and went through the wicket-gate; but before he climbed the knoll, he leant across the little

gate—his Gate to Wonderland—and gazed back at the wood. A queen Humble-Bee flew slowly past. She had wakened from her long rest and had before her the work of founding a new colony. She disappeared into a Willow-bush at the stream-side, where the silvery Catkins were powdered with golden pollen.

Over the trees there was a soft bloom of fresh green, and on the ground below them tiny seedlings pushed up green heads, and Ferns uncurled green fronds; the air was full of the scent of fresh green things. A Blackbird was whistling beside the Bramble-patch, and the “coo-coo” of a Wood-Pigeon came from the Larch-wood; a faint humming sounded among the Catkins, and a whirring from the grasses beside the gurgling stream. To Brian they all sang the same song, “Spring has come! Spring has come!”

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